

WHEN ELEPHANTS CLASH: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF
MAJOR GENERAL PAUL EMIL VON LETTOW-VORBECK
IN THE EAST AFRICAN THEATER
OF THE GREAT WAR

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ABSTRACT

WHEN ELEPHANTS CLASH: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MAJOR GENERAL PAUL EMIL VON LETTOW-VORBECK IN THE EAST AFRICAN THEATER OF THE GREAT WAR, MAJ Thomas A. Crowson, 104 pages.

For over four years during World War I, Lieutenant Colonel (Later Major General) Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, commander of the German *Schutztruppe* led the men of the British East African Expeditionary Force on a chase over some of the most inhospitable terrain imaginable. As the commander of German forces in East Africa, he was the author of one of the most successful guerrilla fights in history. His innovative and creative solutions to daily problems proved to be the undoing of a succession of British commanders, allowing him to bleed Allied forces from European fronts. Although he never had more than 3,000 European and 15,000 native soldiers, von Lettow-Vorbeck consumed the efforts of over 250,000 Allied (mostly British) soldiers. Von Lettow-Vorbeck and the men of the *Schutztruppe* are little known outside of Germany, but they were never defeated and have the distinction of being the only Germans of World War I to occupy British soil. Despite their successes, their exploits remain obscured in the greater tragedy of the Great War.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It was a hot day, but they were all hot so nobody noticed. The equatorial climate bleached their hair, burnt them red, and sucked all the energy out of their bodies. To add to the discomfort of the British soldiers, sweat ran across their brows and down their necks soaking their shirts and attracting so many flies, chiggers, gnats, and assorted other creatures that at times they could hardly see. Nobody had the energy to swat them or even shoo them away. The beasties were just a factor like the weather and the gnawing hunger that never really left their bellies. Sometimes the ache changed from an overwhelming pain to a dull roar. The Quartermaster supplied the men with coffee beans and flour, but nothing to make these into real food. These rations were supposed to last to the end of the march. But then again, the march was only supposed to last a few days. Flour mixed with water did little to help, but it did plug the crippling diarrhea from which so many soldiers were suffering and dying. So much came out of these wretched men that others would begin to wonder if they actually ate more than every other day. In an effort to lessen the hunger of his men, one captain, in direct violation of standing orders, shot an elephant. His company ate well then, but in the jungle nothing lasts. Everything began to rot within a day. The starving men ate their fill, smoked what they could and left the rest.

As bad as it was for the soldiers, the *Askari*¹ and porters had it worse. They ate what the British soldiers left behind. The natives were happy to get the trunk of the elephant. There were hundreds of porters with their families carrying upwards of fifty pounds each. Nobody knew what kept them going, but day after day they were there

carrying the gear. Earlier, the force had attempted to use horses, but they were no use. The animals died quickly from many of the same diseases that were killing the men--diarrhea, malnutrition, and parasites. The best thing that came from the horses was few good stews and full stomachs. Soon, that was just a memory as well.

Suddenly from the front came the familiar sound of cannon fire. It was one of the guns the Germans had salvaged from their wrecked boat named *Königsberg*. British forces had captured one of these giant guns, but the Germans spiked it first. They never left behind anything useful. How they managed to manhandle the big guns into position was a continuous source of discussion over many campfires. These huge naval guns were not meant to be moved by soldiers. Nevertheless, the Germans regularly muscled them into position, propped them up with wood and iron beams, and set them in place to ambush a passing force. The British response was as if it was rehearsed on the parade field. A whistle blew, the commander yelled "follow me" and off they went. They attempted the standard flanking maneuver, but always the treacherous jungle floor tripped them up when they moved from the relative safety of the trails. It hardly matter anyway. The enemy anticipated every move the British made and a group of German *Askari* rose up from behind their well-camouflaged positions and fired with murderous precision. At the beginning of the war, nobody could have thought native troops would have been so disciplined or deadly. That belief had changed.

As soon as it started it was over. The British gave chase, but as usual, found nothing. There were a few German wounded evacuated to the rear (these were civilized gentlemen after all) but not much else. The enemy melted into the night leaving ten or more British wounded or dead to their one. The surviving soldiers often did not know

whether to envy the wounded or not. For the wounded, the war might be over. It meant moving to the rear and getting some hot food and rest. On the other hand, it could mean their death. In most soldiers' minds, a hospital was a disease-infested place full of pain-wracked men and harried doctors doing their best with meager supplies, a place to die. But then again, so was the jungle. They took a few hours to evacuate the wounded and bury the dead, then returned to their never-ending march. It was all supposed to be a big lark; a quick sideshow in the Great War. There was to have been a summer of campaigning in African big game country then back to the real war on the continent. There were not enough German soldiers "down there" to slow down the British Army. They had been at it for about a year. It did not look like it was going to be over any time soon.

The overwhelming belief among the British soldiers was that the enemy success was the doing of one man: the Commander of German Forces in East Africa, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck. They were not far off the mark. Von Lettow-Vorbeck was a creative man whose vastly outnumbered German forces led the British on a chase in the African *Bundu*² for over four years. Despite a lack of food, personnel, weapons, ammunition, and communication with Berlin, Lettow (as he was known to his peers) never surrendered to the British until well past the armistice in 1918. The purpose of this thesis is to examine how von Lettow-Vorbeck held out against the superior British forces for over four years. What skills and personality traits did he bring to his command, how did he use them, why did he continue to fight, and did he achieve his intent?

If one looks for information about the campaign in East Africa during the Great War, he would look in the "Other Campaigns" chapter. There, lumped in with

information on the conduct of the war in the few German colonies in the Pacific and on the West African coast are often a few paragraphs about East Africa. It is unfortunate that more consideration is not given to actions in German and British East Africa. This theater of war was home to exploits that were unheard of on the Western Front. Soldiers in East Africa regularly marched hundreds of miles through some of the most varied and inhospitable terrain in the world between battles. Many of these soldiers were groups of professional hunters or individualists who fought the war in their own manner; almost as if it were sport. In addition to these "white hunters," crocodiles, rhinoceroses, bees, baboons, and elephants all added to the confusion of the campaign. The region, which was home to the longest dirigible voyage, longest naval battle, and longest campaign of the Great War, is regularly condemned to a dusty shelf in the history section of the library and a passing note in a textbook.

¹*Askari* was a word used on both sides of the war to describe the native African laborers. It comes from the Swahili word meaning "guard" or "protector."

²A Swahili word meaning "thorn, often used to describe the inner, wild regions of Africa.

CHAPTER 2

POLITICS, THE MILITARY, AND THE COLONIES OF EAST AFRICA

Just before the outbreak of the Great War, an amusing story was circulating among the troops of the *Schutztruppe*. One sunny day in July of 1914, a lieutenant, bored with his field duty in the *Schutztruppe* of the German army, decided he deserved to have some fun. The young man was stationed in a remote site near Mount Kilimanjaro on the border between British and German East Africa. As this location seemed quite close to the middle of nowhere, he rode into the nearest town Moshi for a few beers. Knowing ahead his commander's answer would be "no," he did not bother asking for permission.

On the way to Moshi, he happened upon a civilian walking down the road chewing a piece of sugar cane. When the young lieutenant found they were going in the same direction, he magnanimously offered to walk with the man and protect him should anything unfriendly appear in the region. The civilian, a balding, pleasant man in his mid-forties accepted. Soon, the lieutenant was telling the older man his life's story and expounding upon what was wrong with the German forces in East Africa. He told of the boredom of duty on the plain, the poor quality of the weaponry, and his current "French" leave. His only concern was that "the new commander, Von Lettow-Vorbeck, doesn't hear about it. They say he's a real bastard." To this his companion laughed knowingly and agreed.

As they rounded the final bend on the road into town, a senior officer saluted the affable civilian and addressed him as "sir." As it dawned upon him who the smiling old man must be, the younger officer blanched white, came to a stiff position of attention and

gave his best parade ground salute. Images of a short career and a long boat ride home raced through his mind as the older man, Lieutenant Colonel Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, Commander of forces in German East Africa, looked at him with a grin on his face. "At ease," commanded von Lettow-Vorbeck, "what you said was said to a comrade. No comrade would inform the commander, certainly."¹ The lieutenant quickly turned around and raced back to his unit, adding one more page to the legend that would become von Lettow-Vorbeck.

It was his reputation as "a real bastard" upon which the German General Staff was counting when it ordered von Lettow-Vorbeck to assume command of the forces in German East Africa. At the time of his appointment, no active German officer could boast more combat experience.² His familiarity with battle was hard earned, gained in some of the most remote, outlying regions of the world. At one time, he was even loaned by the German General Staff to work on the staff of General Louis Botha of the South African Army.

From 1899 to 1901, he worked on the German General Staff³ where he gained a familiarity with and respect for good planning. During his time on the staff, he had the opportunity to make an impression of the British army while serving as an observer during the Chinese Boxer rebellion of 1900. His initial opinion of the British Empire at war was unfavorable. Despite the professional reputation of soldiers of the British Empire, Lettow was surprised by "the clumsiness of the English troops in battle."⁴ He would be given few reasons to alter this initial impression during the Great War. He was also given the opportunity to study the tactics of another future adversary while seconded to the pre-Boer War South African guerrilla leader Louis Botha. This experience

impacted him favorably as he sang the praises of "the excellent qualities of this low german [sic] race."⁵ From 1904 to 1906, he served in German Southwest Africa as the adjutant to Lieutenant General von Trotha during the uprising of the Hottentot and Herero tribes.⁶ At the time, an adjutant functioned as a combination aide, chief of personal staff, and occasional line officer for his general. During his tenure he studied the African enemy and attempted to learn what made them such effective warriors.⁷ While many of his counterparts regarded the native Africans as inferior fighters and not worth their notice, von Lettow-Vorbeck saw them as ingenious fighters able to conduct war in a manner with which he was unfamiliar. To remedy this deficit in his military education, he spent a great deal of time interrogating prisoners in an attempt to find out how they fought. He learned how natives were able to survive in the wilderness when no supplies were available, where to find water in the most inhospitable climates, how to read African terrain and get his bearings, and how to push himself beyond what he perceived as his limits. Most of all, he focused on the essence of guerrilla warfare and native tactics.⁸ He would regularly patrol with native forces to get firsthand experience in their fighting style. On one of these patrols, he was wounded in the eye and had to be evacuated to Germany. Ironically, he was evacuated through German East Africa. A place he would come to know intimately within a decade.⁹ After his recovery, he was given command of a marine battalion in Willemshaven. This close interaction with the navy gave him a better understanding of what they had to bring to the land fight. Furthermore, the ship upon which he was embarked often sailed along the coast of German East Africa, giving him more knowledge of the land in which he would later fight.¹⁰

The roots of the German presence on the East African coast can be traced back to the period immediately after the unification of all German states in 1871. Ironically, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck was vehemently against a colonial policy. "For Germany to acquire colonies would be like a poverty stricken nobleman providing himself with silks and sables when he needed sheets."¹¹ He continued in this manner repeatedly stating, "so long as I'm Chancellor, we shan't pursue a colonial policy."¹² He gave four primary reasons for his belief. First and foremost was the question of who would pay for the cost of colonization. Germany had recently concluded a costly war with France and had a nation to build. There were few *Marks* in the coffers for colonial development. Second was public opinion. Bismarck believed the easygoing lifestyle in the tropics would be at odds with that of the Germans. Additionally, the bulk of the German public saw little to gain from acquisition of colonies. Third was the question of defense. Germany had a small navy and Africa was far away. There was no real way to defend a colony against aggressors. Finally, a colonial policy could damage the balance of power in Europe. Although powerful, Germany was a new nation that could not yet risk enraging other, more firmly established nations.¹³

Bismarck's stance changed quickly in 1884, when he announced the annexation of four German colonies in Africa. There were many reasons for his shift, but the most obvious was that public opinion had changed. In the late 1870s the German Union for Colonialism (*Deutscher Kolonial Verein*) was formed.¹⁴ This organization, though not supported by the government, was intent on bringing colonies to the German nation. One of its more ambitious leaders Dr. Karl Peters went so far as to lead several expeditions to Africa, bringing back to Bismarck thumbprints and "signatures" from tribal chieftains

ceding their land to German control.¹⁵ Although he was still against a colonial policy, referring to it as a "*Schwindel*" or "sham,"¹⁶ he realized the power of popular opinion and saw a means to block British desires to gain the entire East African coast. The Coast was strategically important, containing many outposts on the route to India as well as access to the Suez. In this one calculated move, Bismarck saw the opportunity to poke Great Britain in the eye. Internal German politics presented another reason to take action against the British. The German Crown Prince Friedrich had taken an English wife. Bismarck believed that the future Kaiser, a strong believer in colonial policy, was completely under his wife's thumb. He hoped a British reaction to German imperialism would create a feeling of Anglophobia, reducing her future power as it increased his.¹⁷

As to the question of whether or not the colonies would pay for themselves, again, popular opinion ruled. Reports coming from Africa related potential wealth just waiting to be taken. On 11 January 1876, *The Times of London* published a report by Lieutenant Cameron, a British explorer extolling the riches of interior Africa.

The interior is mostly a magnificent and healthy country of unspeakable richness. I have a small specimen of good coal; other minerals such as gold, copper, iron and silver are abundant, and I am confident that with wise and liberal (no lavish) expenditure of capital, one of the greatest systems of inland navigation in the world might be utilized and from 30 months to 36 months begin to repay any enterprising capitalist that might take the matter in hand.¹⁸

Bismarck hoped to capitalize on this reported wealth by creating a company to act as steward of German East Africa. His goal was to fulfill the perceived need of the public for an East African colony with little cost to Germany. The final consideration--how to protect the colony--was judged by the Chancellor to be unimportant. The colonial government would use local natives with a few white officers to protect Germany's

interests. Besides, it would give the newly forming German navy a reason to show a presence in the area.¹⁹

The British reaction to the annexation of colonies was decidedly unfavorable. Great Britain had been in the area since the eighteenth century, primarily to stave off French colonial ambitions. Despite a desire to control the entire east coast of Africa, the Crown had previously seen no reason to formally colonize the region. Now it was forced to do so. In 1886, the British sponsored a delimitation commission between the British, German, and French governments to establish the colonial borders within Africa. However, little was accomplished.²⁰ In 1887, the British East Africa Company was established under the control of Sir William MacKinnon. However, rumors of the wealth of Africa proved to be false. The company quickly went bankrupt and asked for assistance.²¹

The German colonies did little better. Although colonists were able to establish cotton and rubber plantations, they were unprofitable. Since the colonies were primarily a status symbol and expected to be self-sufficient, there was little inclination to invest in infrastructure. Additionally, the coast was owned and controlled by the Sultan of Zanzibar. In 1888, Germany persuaded the Sultan to lease the coast to Germany for fifty years by parking a battleship off his coast.²²

The colonial government, under the leadership of Dr. Peters, quickly abolished the slave trade in the region. The abolishment of slavery along with the many atrocities that had previously been committed by Dr. Peters in the name of Germany, incited Bushiri bin Salim and his followers to declare a holy war on Germany. As bin Salim's followers burned German property and killed German natives, Bismarck sent Captain

Herman von Wissman to crush the rebellion. His orders were, "*siegen Sie!*"²³ or "go win." In the end it took a combined effort by both the Germans and the British to suppress the rebellion.

As the rebellion was put down, the governments of the two nations resolved to work together in East Africa. The result of this agreement was the Anglo German Treaty of 1890. The treaty established borders between German and British territory, which previously had only been marked by the empty vermouth bottles, the contents of which the original explorers had consumed as "protection" against blackwater fever.²⁴ Under this treaty, Great Britain obtained British East Africa, Zanzibar, and Uganda, which Dr. Peters had attempted to annex for Germany. Germany received German East Africa, to include the coast.²⁵

The two countries took diverging routes in their handling of their East African colonies. Great Britain, the more experienced colonial power, took a more hands off approach.²⁶ The British East Africa Company build three main railroads into the interior and Lake Victoria, the headwaters of the Nile. By 1913, there were approximately 3,500 British settlers in British East Africa. The region was treated as a resort that rivaled the French Riviera. Cricket, polo, tennis, and big game hunting were everywhere as were names found in *Burkes Peerage*.²⁷ People at home in London could see posters extolling the wonders of East Africa. One such handbill showed pictures of smiling crocodiles, monkeys, hippopotamuses, and lions waving to a trainload of happy people arriving at the station. The caption boasted:

Uganda railway. The highlands of British East Africa as a winter home for aristocrats has become a fashion. Sportsmen in search of big game make it a holiday. Students of natural history revel in this field of natures own making.

Uganda railway cars pass through the greatest natural game preserve in the world.²⁸

However, despite good soil and land favorable for livestock, the colony never became self-sufficient.

The Germans took a different approach to their colonies. In 1891, Captain von Wissman was appointed Governor of the East African colony, which was placed under the foreign office.²⁹ He immediately attempted to create some infrastructure including a port at Tanga and a railroad. However, colonial ardor had slackened in Germany. By 1901, the port at Tanga was only a pile of rocks, and the railroad stretched only thirty miles.³⁰ Income from the region was approximately one million dollars per year, yet cost Germany two million per year.³¹ The German public simply did not want to throw money into what was perceived as an unprofitable venture.

Unlike the northern British colony, German East Africa suffered from nearly continuous native uprisings. Dr. Peters had given natives few rights and settlers were allowed to work natives like slaves. If natives failed to comply with the rules of their masters, they were brutally punished. Dr. Peters himself was known for his harsh treatment of natives when in pursuit of thumbprints to add to the greater German empire.³² The most deadly uprising came from an area outside the German sphere. The Waehe were a warlike tribe whose lands were south of German East Africa. The tribal leader Mkawa was afraid the Germans would detract from his authority in the region. After a series of raids on German property, the Governor of the colony sent Captain Emil von Zelewsky to bring Mkawa to justice. Captain von Zelewsky's command was ambushed and massacred. The slaughter was the beginning of seven years of bitter war between the Germans and Waehe. The leader of the German forces Captain Tom Prince

ran a ruthless campaign of extermination against the Waehe. For his efforts, he was awarded the honorific "von" by the Kaiser. The natives, however, had a different name for him: *Bwana Sakharani* or "he who is drunk with fighting."³³ The Waehe uprising was not the last of the rebellions against the German rulers. Small skirmishes continued almost until the beginning of the war.

These skirmishes served to shape the German Army in East Africa. Von Prince realized that he faced a formidable guerrilla force and learned from it. He reformed the army of German East Africa to be more mobile and self-sufficient. The basic unit became the *Schutztruppe* or field company. It consisted of seven or eight German officers and noncommissioned officers. These men were of the highest caliber Germany had to offer. To serve in the colonial forces, a German had to have already completed three years of active duty; submitted to a thorough medical examination; and be of the best character, intelligence, and initiative. The soldier's reward for accepting a two and a half year assignment was five years credit toward his pension. Serving under these men were between 150 and 200 natives known as *Askari*, around seven hundred porters, and possibly several irregulars, known as *ruga ruga* who were usually employed as scouts or raiders. Each logistically autonomous company also had collapsible boats, two machine-gun teams, and a surgeon. Most importantly, the Germans respected the ability of the natives. A field service manual of the *Schutztruppe* stated:

His [the native soldier's] mobility and incredible marching powers, coupled with accurate knowledge of the country, make him able to carry out apparently impossible detours. He has no fixed line of retreat, for after a defeat his forces break up into small parties, which retire in all directions, and concentrate again at points previously agreed upon, often in the rear of the victorious troops. After discharging their fire-arms, the natives retire hastily . . . to get ahead of the column so that they may repeat their attack. . . . By constantly harassing their

enemy in this way, they hope, while avoiding serious losses on their own side, to tire him out, compel him to expend his ammunition and gradually reduce his power of resistance till he can be finally overwhelming by an energetic spear-attack. . . . The natives think themselves beaten in a fight only when they have suffered great losses: flight and escape with small losses they regard as success. . . . Only in exceptional cases has it been possible to take them by surprise."³⁴

The *Schutztruppe* attempted to model itself after the native bands. Its officers concentrated on learning native tactics, camouflage, weaponry, and terrain. Already fluent in these areas, the *Askari* focused on the use of their firearms. The professional training they received, combined with the ability to continuously practice their craft against native uprisings, led to a well-trained force characterized by high mobility, esprit, and ability.³⁵

The British equivalent of the *Schutztruppe* was the Kings African Rifles (KAR). Although organized similarly to the German force, it was not as mobile and only contained one machine gun. The officers were also of high caliber, learning either in Africa or another British colony the art of guerrilla warfare. However, as the British colonies were more peaceful, the KAR did not receive the practical experience of their German counterparts. A KAR company commander Captain (later Colonel) Richard Meinertzhagen, who would serve as the intelligence officer for the British Expeditionary Forces in East Africa during the Great War, summed up what he believed were the essential differences between the forces. "I do not doubt that the Germans have created as fine a military machine out here as they have done at home. . . . They are every bit as good as our KAR but lack the ties which exist between officer in man. In the KAR it is a bond of genuine friendship. Among the Germans it is the tie of iron discipline."³⁶ Although disciplined, the true tie between the European and native troops of the *Schutztruppe* was respect.

The year 1914 started out little different than any other year in East Africa. Both colonies had still failed to turn a profit, but expected to turn the corner within a few years.³⁷ The German colony had finished its railroad from the interior to Tanga. Although there were grumblings of war in Europe, both sides officially claimed that the treaty of 1890 precluded war in the colonies. Although the British colonial governor and possibly the government itself put little credence in a piece of paper, the German Governor Dr. Heinrich Schnee considered it to be gospel.³⁸ As the armies of both colonies reported directly to their respective governor, Schnee believed he could prevent belligerence in the region. However, he had not counted on the persistence of Lieutenant Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck realized that the German general staff had sent him to East Africa for a reason. "During the past ten years the universal war had more than once seemed so imminent that I was obliged seriously to consider whether the force under my command would be called to take any part in that conflict, and, if so, what its task might be."³⁹ After consideration, he realized that he did have a place in the Great War. "Could we, with our small forces, prevent considerable numbers of the enemy from intervening in Europe, or in other more important theatres, or inflict on our enemies any loss of personnel or materials worth mentioning? I answered this question in the affirmative."⁴⁰

Immediately upon arrival he set out to determine what his resources were and what he had to accomplish with them. His first stop was at the home of his former classmate at the German Military Academy Captain Tom von Prince, who had retired from active duty. Von Prince gave him an accurate estimate of the situation in the colony, pledged his support if war did come, and gave von Lettow-Vorbeck names of other

retired military personnel who would do the same.⁴¹ With this information in hand, he began a tour of the countryside which concluded with the promise of several former officers to fight for the fatherland if war should come. He had inspected all of his troops, finding the *Askari* well trained despite poor weapons. The native police forces, he found abysmal and immediately began a training program designed to bring them up to Prussian standard. Most of all, he gained an understanding of the land, which would serve him well in the upcoming years.⁴²

In the fall of 1914, Arch Duke Ferdinand was shot, touching off the spark that would lead to the Great War. The Great War had begun. While the British Colonial Government secretly began preparations for war, the Germans under the leadership of Dr. Schnee resolved to be neutral in the conflict. Regardless of what orders came from Europe, the armed forces of the two colonies appeared equally matched. While the British forces held the advantage on the sea and had better weapons, the Germans were slightly better trained and led. They had the advantage of experience and needed only to draw troops from other fronts to be successful. The stage was set for the longest campaign of the Great War.

¹Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guerilla! Colonel Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 8.

²David M. Keithly, "Khaki Foxes: The East Africa Korps," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 12, no. 1 (spring, 2001):166-185;169.

³Geoffrey. King, "A Study of the German Operations in German East Africa During the World War, 1914-1918." (Master's thesis, The Command and General Staff School, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1930), 2.

⁴Charles. Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, 1974), 38.

⁵Ibid., 5.

⁶Hoyt, 10.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Keithly, 169.

⁹King, 2.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Miller, 5.

¹²Thomas Packenham, *The Scramble for Africa, White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912* (New York: Avon Books, 1991), 203.

¹³Deutsche Historische Museum Berlin (DHM) (German Historical Museum of Berlin). "LeMO: Lebendiges Virtuelles Museum Online" (Virtual living museum on-line; accessed 12 October 2002) available from <http://www.dhm.de/lemo/home.html> (innenpolitik); Internet.

¹⁴Packenham, 204.

¹⁵Miller, 6.

¹⁶Packenham, 205. Also in DHM, innenpolitik.

¹⁷Packenham 204.

¹⁸Ibid., 12.

¹⁹G. G. Parks, "A Critical Analysis of the Operations in German East Africa" (Master's thesis, The Command and General Staff School, Ft. Leavenworth, KS, 1934), 1.

²⁰Edmund Dane, *British Campaigns in Africa and the Pacific, 1914-1918* (London, New York, and Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), 75.

²¹Miller, 8.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., 9.

²⁴Brian Gardner, *On to Kilimanjaro* (Philadelphia: McRae Smith Company, 1963), 21.

²⁵Dane, 75-6.

²⁶Miller, 27.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Bror Blixen, illustration 3.

²⁹Miller, 9.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹DHM, available from <http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/kaiserreich/aussenpolitik/kolonien/index.html>; Internet.

³²Miller, 10.

³³Hoyt, 21.

³⁴Miller 15.

³⁵Ibid., 16.

³⁶Ibid., 28.

³⁷DHM, <http://www.dhm.de/lemo/html/kaiserreich/aussenpolitik/kolonien2/index.html>.

³⁸Miller, 28.

³⁹Paul E. Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1920), 3.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Hoyt, 11.

⁴²Ibid., 12.

CHAPTER 3

PHASE 1: GERMAN INITIATIVE AUGUST 1914-FEBRUARY 1916

News of the declaration of war reached Nairobi, the capital of British East Africa, on 4 August 1914, touching off a flurry of activity in the settlement. Nairobi became the gathering ground for hundreds of men running to the call of war. Other considerations were set aside as the men, many of whom were former military personnel who had settled in the region, clamored to enlist to fight the German horde. Out of fear, many ethnic Germans in the British colony fled south to the more amenable German colony, but a significant number remained. Concerned that their country might ally itself with Germany, the Swedish settlers in the British colony, unwilling to miss the great adventure, gathered at the home of renowned white hunter Baron Bror von Blixen. The Swedes were a collection of farmers and famous white hunters, such as Baron Erik von Otter, Helge Fagerskold, and Emil Homberg. They made most of their money from British sources and had numerous British friends. After some discussion and a lot more alcohol, the men determined they would fight for the British unless Sweden joined the Germans. They would worry about that when the time came. The next day, they cycled to Nairobi and joined with another renowned white hunter Bowker Douglas, to become officers in a volunteer cavalry unit, "Bowkers' Horse."

Men of all sorts poured into Nairobi. They carried a myriad of weapons including pig sticker spears, muzzleloaders, handguns, varmint guns, shotguns, and elephant guns. They arrived on mules, ponies, race horses, plow horses, and bicycles, and on foot. Their uniforms were whatever dashing apparel they thought appropriate for war. There were so

many former officers in the crowd that captains from famous regiments were often mustered in as sergeants.

From this motley crew a cavalry unit was formed and named the East African Mounted Rifles (EAMR). They were a highly unorthodox and undisciplined unit consisting of white hunters, Boer trekkers, aristocrats, deadbeats, remittance men, con men, sanitary inspectors, and drunks along with the occasional "respectable" citizen. The only semblance of a uniform was a patch worn on the sleeve (if indeed they had a sleeve) with the letters "EAMR." Colonel D. P. Driscoll, DSO, commander of the EAMR was so impressed with the unit that he wired the War Office in London and offered to invade German East Africa immediately. The War Office had other plans.¹

On the other side, Lieutenant Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck was between the horns of a dilemma. As a soldier in the *Kaiser's* Army, he felt he had a responsibility to prosecute the war against the enemies of the fatherland wherever they might be. Unfortunately, the military in the colonies were subordinate to the colonial government.² Dr. Heinrich Schnee, the Governor of German East Africa, firmly believed that both the British and German colonies were guaranteed neutrality under article eleven of the Congo Act of 1885, which stated that a European war was not to be extended into the Central African colonies. This act effectively guaranteed all colonies within the Congo basin neutrality, despite the plans of their European sovereigns. Schnee declared German East Africa neutral, proclaimed the ports of Dar-Es-Salaam and Tanga to be open, and ordered the military not to take up arms against the British.³ To escape this order, Commander Max Loof, Captain of the battleship *Königsberg*, put to sea immediately upon notice of hostilities.⁴ Von Lettow-Vorbeck had no such recourse.

To ensure there were no misunderstandings, Schnee stated the official attitude of the German Colonial Government. "In no way, except in our thoughts and sympathies, shall we in the Colony do anything that may be considered militarily aiding the Fatherland. . . . [I]t will be the duty of all of us in the Colony to refrain from belligerent activity."⁵ Such an attitude encouraged Norman King, the British Consul in East Africa, to issue a report to London and Nairobi that, "The Germans have no stomach for fighting." He furthermore stated that a gentlemen's agreement existed allowing Great Britain peaceful use of German East Africa's two main ports, Tanga and Dar-Es-Salaam.⁶

Von Lettow-Vorbeck saw things from a purely military perspective. German East Africa was bounded on all sides by potential enemy colonies. Its largest border, to the north, was shared with British East Africa. The border ran west from the ocean splitting Lake Victoria until it ran into Uganda, which was also under British control. Continuing around the border counterclockwise was the Belgian Congo, with whom German East Africa shared Lake Tanganyika, a strategically important waterway. As the Germans had recently driven their troops through the formerly neutral country's European countryside, Belgian feelings toward the Germans were less than cordial. Finally, to the south were Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland, and Mozambique. These British colonies controlled lines of communication to South Africa (figure 1).

The climate varied from equatorially hot at the coast to favorable in the plains to snowy at the top of Mount Kilimanjaro. The country was accessible through two railroads. The northern or Tanga-Moschi Railroad was 220 miles long running through the Usambara Highlands, Kilimanjaro, and Moschi. The southern or Dar-Es-Salaam-Tanganyika Railroad was 787 miles long running through Tabora and the central plains.⁷

Rivers ran generally west to east. Although the rail and rivers served to make latitudinal movement possible, north-south movement was difficult. The only easy means was the use of the coast or Lake Tanganyika (figure 2).

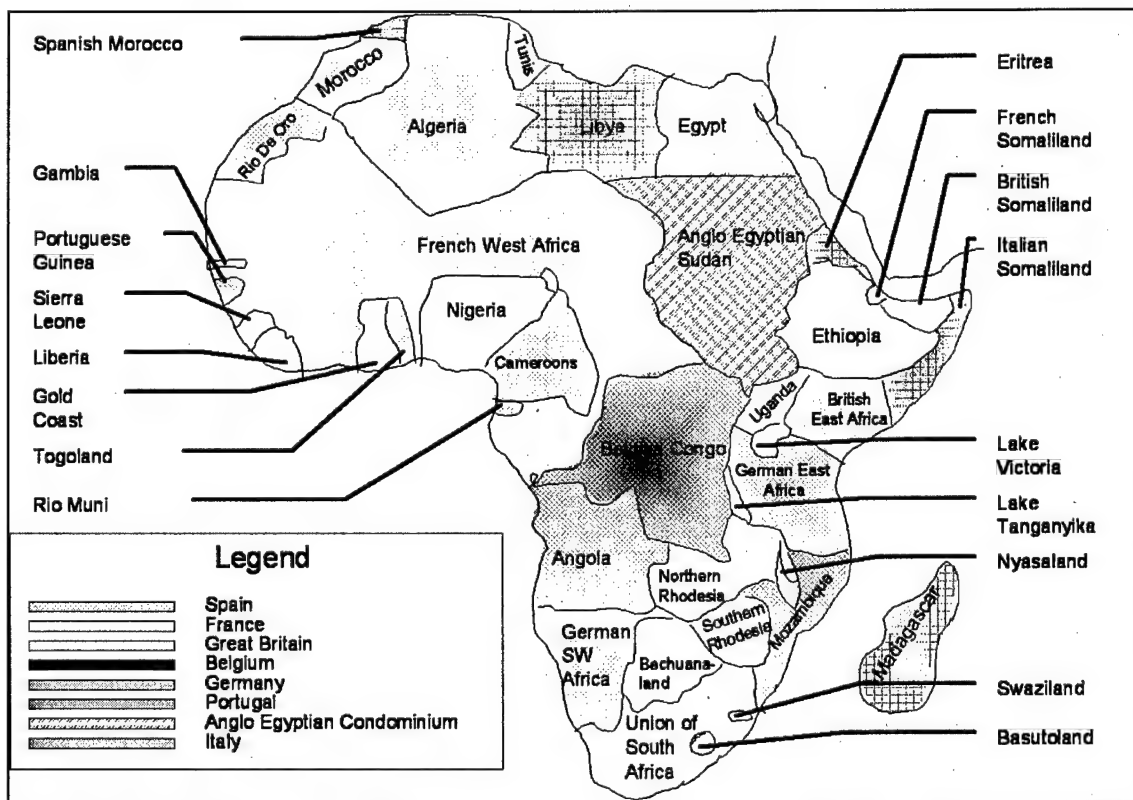


Figure 1. African Colonies in 1914

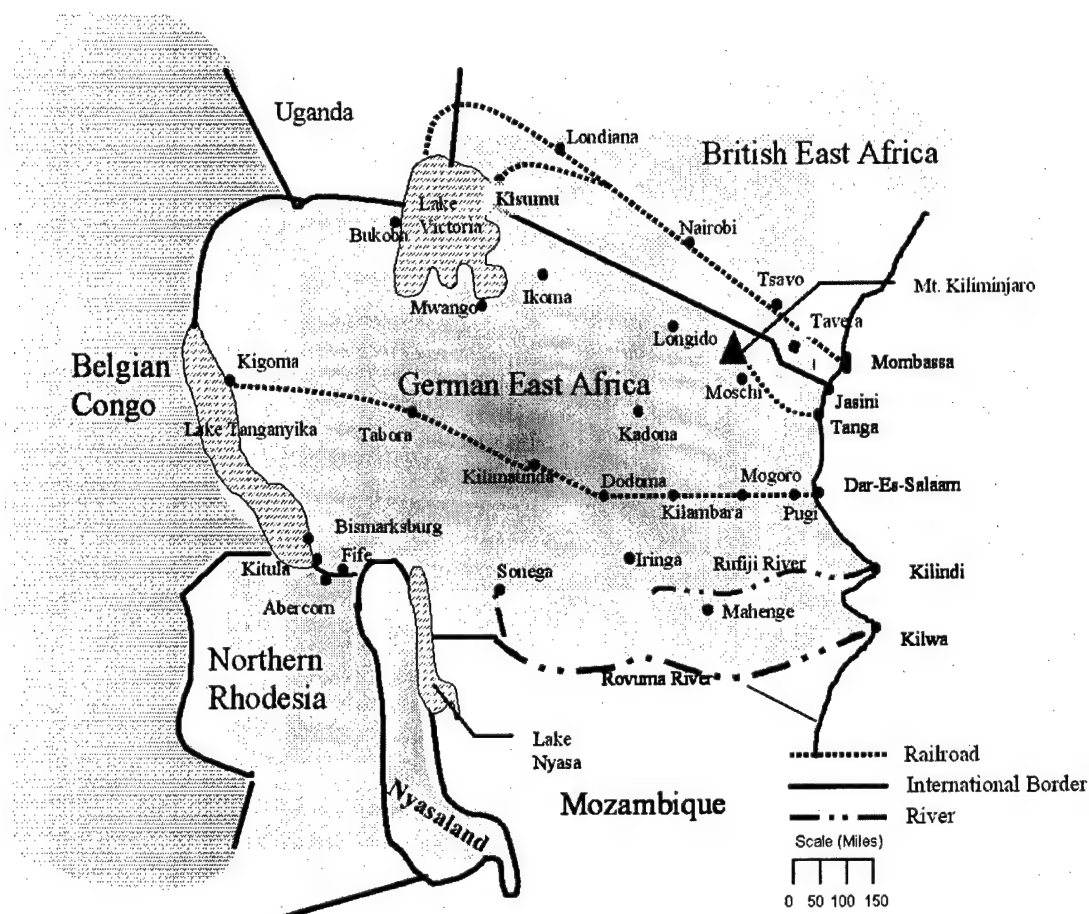


Figure 2. German East Africa

From his analysis of the situation, von Lettow-Vorbeck made some preliminary decisions regarding war in East Africa. Mobility became central to his plan.⁸ The first priority was to secure Lake Tanganyika to provide north-south mobility. He stated his reason as, "The ability rapidly to transfer troops from the Central Railway towards Bismarcksburg or Usambara depended entirely upon unimpeded transport on Tanganyika and played a part in the later course of operations."⁹ Next was the security of the Northern Railroad and Lake Victoria. The Northern Railway, which ended at the port of Tanga, allowed a commander to rail troops anywhere on the northern border within a day.

It was also, von Lettow-Vorbeck believed, the most logical place for the British to make their initial attack.

It was too important to prevent the enemy from gaining a firm footing in Tanga. Otherwise we should abandon to him the best base for operations against the Northern territories; in this advance the Northern Railway would afford him an admirable line of communication, and he would be enabled continually to surprise us by bringing up and pushing forward fresh troops and stores. Then it was certain that we should be unable to hold the Northern Railways any longer and that we would be obliged to abandon our hitherto so successful method of warfare.¹⁰

When Lieutenant Colonel von Lettow-Vorbeck discussed his misgivings with Dr. Schnee, the governor was unmoved. Dr. Schnee was committed to the neutrality of East Africa. Seeing that the Army had troops stationed in Dar-Es-Salaam, he ordered von Lettow-Vorbeck to remove them immediately. Von Lettow-Vorbeck seized upon this opportunity and requested to station his troops in the vicinity of Kilimanjaro. Schnee, realizing the flexibility this would give von Lettow-Vorbeck, forbade him to do so¹¹ and instead ordered him to station his troops one mile east of Dar-Es-Salaam near the town of Pugi.¹² On 8 August 1914, the British conducted a bombardment of Dar-Es-Salaam.¹³ Although this belligerent act still did little to convince the government of the colony that the British had hostile intent,¹⁴ von Lettow-Vorbeck was now positive. He realized that he would have to act without the governor's permission and hope to be forgiven later. Thus he set in motion a previously coordinated plan to secure mobility within his colony and take the fight to the British.

His plan consisted of three columns of *Schutztruppe* commanded by his most trusted officers. The first, under Major Georg Kraut, was to operate over the northern border to occupy Mombassa and seize the Uganda railroad from Mombassa to Lake Victoria. The second, under Major General Kurt von Wehle was to establish bases on

Lake Victoria near the towns of Mwanza and Bukoba. From these bases, he would secure the shores of Lake Victoria, push into Uganda, and occupy as much of the country as he could. The final column, under Count von Falkenstein, was to move south along Lake Tanganyika to Lake Nyasa, then secure Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to cut off lines of communication with the southern British colonies¹⁵ (figure 3). After a review of the plan, von Lettow-Vorbeck realized he must also seize the town of Taveta due to its strategic location with respect to Mombassa, Kilimanjaro, and the Uganda Railroad. This task he gave to his trusted friend Captain Tom von Prince.¹⁶

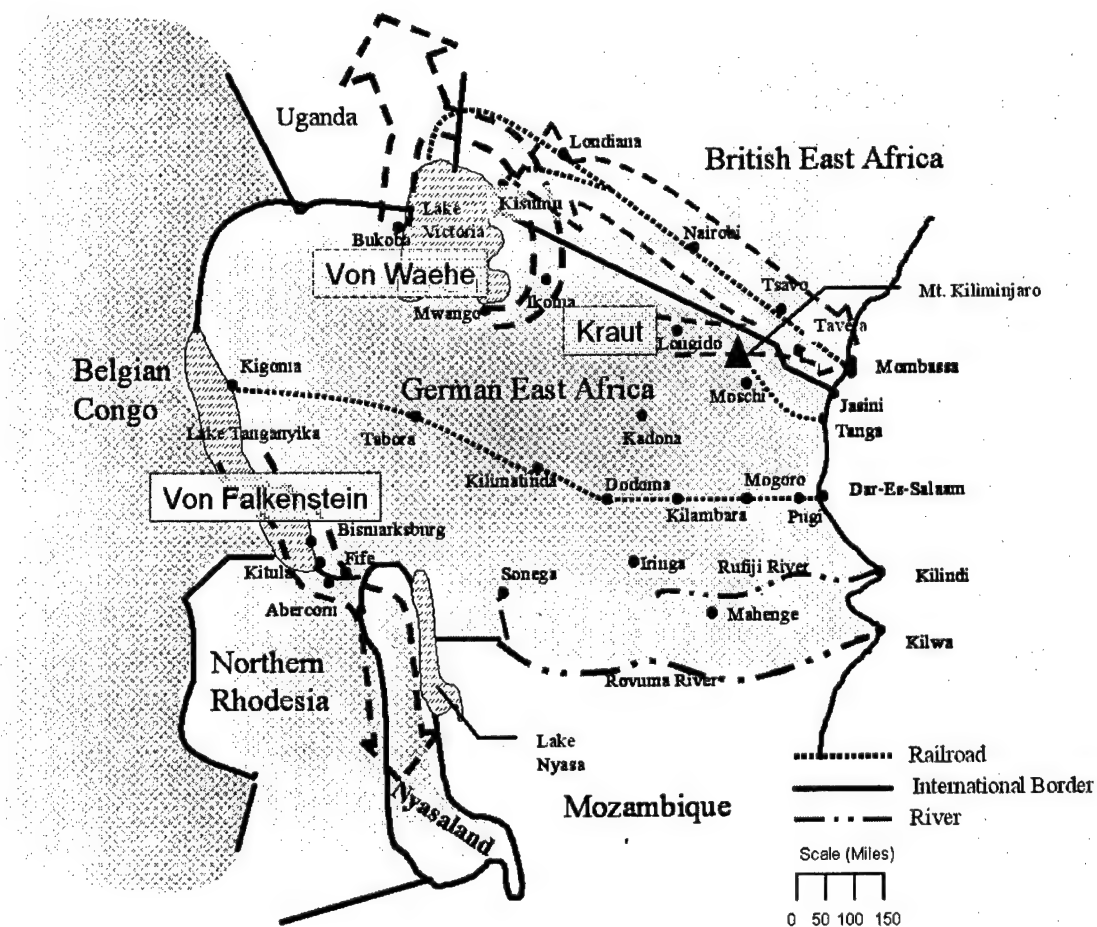


Figure 3. German Plan of Attack

On 8 August von Lettow-Vorbeck gave his commanders the order to attack.¹⁷ By 15 August von Prince had completed his task.¹⁸ The seizure of Taveta turned out to be momentous, as it was the only time during the Great War that a German force occupied British territory.¹⁹ All other attacks failed. Major Kraut encountered a company of 130 Arabs under the command of Lieutenant Wavel. "Wavel's Arabs," as they would come to be known, held up Kraut's column west of Mombassa until Brigadier J. M. Stewart arrived with Indian troops to reinforce Wavel's company. Kraut was forced to retire and consolidate his forces around Moschi.²⁰

Major General von Wehle had been in the colony for only two days on a vacation to visit his son when the war broke out. Although retired, he immediately offered his services to von Lettow-Vorbeck, who, in an attempt to placate the general, placed him in charge of logistics. Von Wehle proved to be a leader who measured up to von Lettow-Vorbeck's high standards. Soon, although concerned about von Wehle's age and ability to handle the rigors of the bush, von Lettow-Vorbeck realized that he could hardly afford not to use such an asset and placed him in command of the second column. Von Lettow-Vorbeck believed that the British would have the majority of their troops in Mombassa dealing with Kraut's force and would therefore leave the Lake Victoria region largely unoccupied. He was wrong. Although initially weak in the lake region, the British quickly loaded two squadrons of the EAMR on ships and sailed from Kisumu to Karunga to stop von Wehle's southern advance. The northern advance continued as far as Uganda, but met with determined resistance from the native protectorate force. Von Wehle was forced to retire on both fronts. Von Lettow-Vorbeck's misgivings about von Wehle's constitution proved to be misplaced, as von Wehle's column managed to seize Karunga

and conducted a thoroughly professional retirement to bases on the southern shore of Lake Victoria.²¹

The southernmost force under Count von Falkenstein was also defeated. The portion of his force focused on Northern Rhodesia moved south down Lake Tanganyika to Bismarcksburg then Abercorn, but was defeated on 6 September. The portion concerned with Nyasaland quickly encountered reserves of the KAR and were surrounded and defeated. Although unable to continue south, von Falkenstein's force did leave the southernmost portion of Lake Tanganyika open to German control. In combination with von Wehle's control of the northern portion of the lake, the Germans had the ability to remove any opposition. Von Lettow-Vorbeck seized upon the opportunity to own the lakes, sending small fighting boats to destroy any enemy craft.²²

By mid-September, von Lettow-Vorbeck's entire attack had stalled. Although he had made some gains, such as the town of Taveta, and had control of Lake Tanganyika, he did not have the forces to exploit these moderate successes. As he still did not have the support of Dr. Schnee and the Government of East Africa, he began to regroup his forces around Kilimanjaro and conduct raids across the northern border along the Uganda Railroad (figure 4). He was more convinced than ever that the British intended to attack at Tanga and he wanted to be ready.

Captured English newspapers stated that it would be particularly painful to Germany to lose her beloved colonies, its "little chicks," and that German East Africa was the most valuable mouthful. Captured mails spoke of an impending attack by an Indian expeditionary force of 10,000 men, and, as I had from general considerations always expected a hostile attack on a large scale in the neighborhood of Tanga.²³

Earlier he had remarked upon the strategic value of Tanga. As time passed, he gained the intelligence that made him believe an attack was imminent. Kilimanjaro would be the

perfect place to marshal troops, in direct violation of Dr. Schnee's orders, for a counterattack into Tanga.

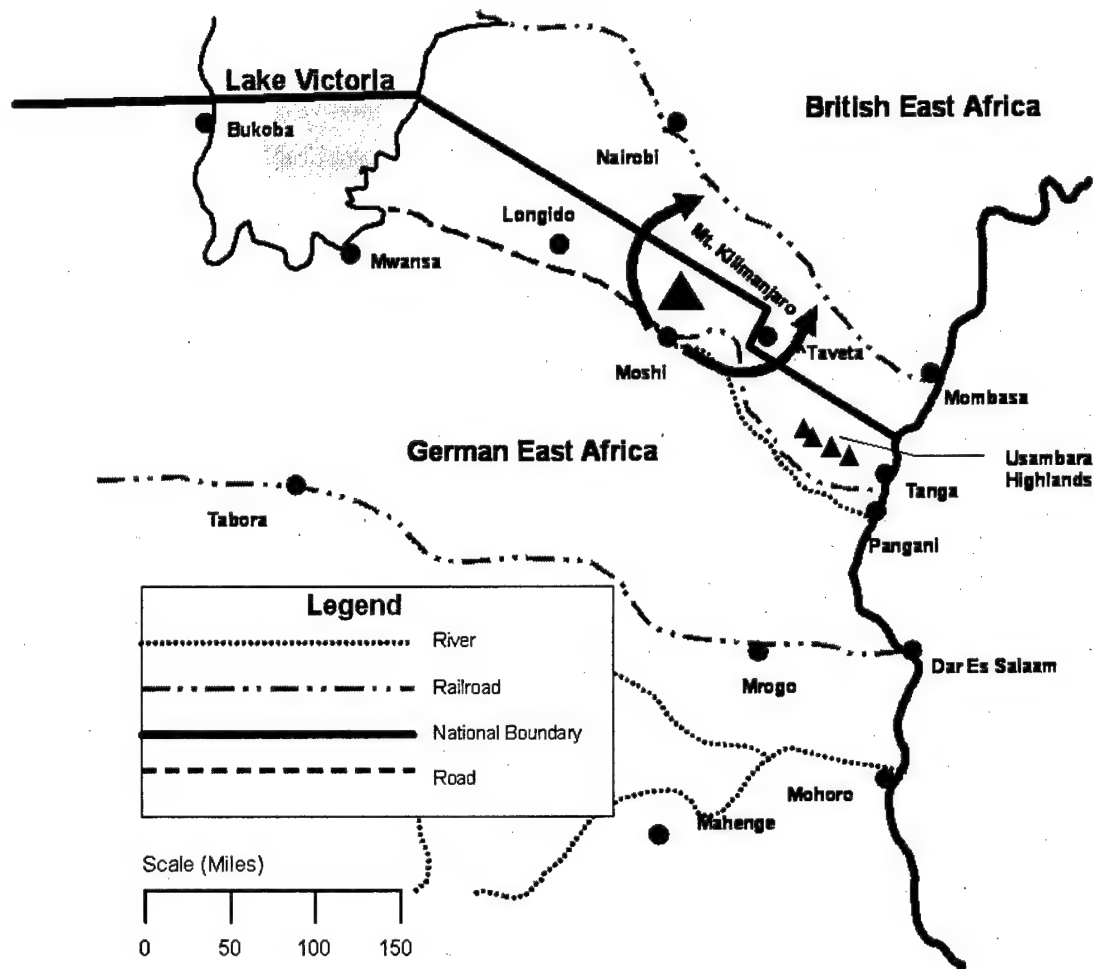


Figure 4. German Attacks on Uganda Railroad

The British did indeed plan to seize Tanga as part of a larger strategy to secure the border between British and German East Africa and to gain control of the interior of German East Africa. Under overall command of Major General Aitken, the British would conduct an amphibious attack with troops shipped from India to take the town of Tanga.

Once they had seized Tanga, they would push up the Tanga-Moschi railroad to cut the German lines of communication and quickly destroy any resistance. The force formed to accomplish the amphibious landing and following attack was designated Force B and commanded by Major General Aitken. Simultaneously, a force under Brigadier General Stewart would attack from the vicinity of Lake Victoria southeast to hit the German rear. By circling around Kilimanjaro and attacking from an unexpected direction they would quickly defeat any German resistance. This force was designated Force C. The two forces would link up around Longido, then move west to Lake Tanganyika, where they would continue south until they met the railroad at Kigoma. It would then be a simple task of moving east along the railway, destroying all resistance until they reached Dar-Es-Salaam²⁴ (figure 5).

General Aitken believed that his troops were up to the task of quickly beating the Germans. In his mind, the Indian troops were of superior quality. Along with their "beloved" British leaders, they would quickly destroy any German resistance and get into the real fight in Europe.²⁵ One member of the force, intelligence officer Captain Richard Meinertzhagen, had a differing opinion.

The plan is bad, for we lay ourselves open to defeat in detail, intercommunication between the two forces being quite impossible, and secondly we should both be operating in the thick bush in terribly unhealthy country and our troops, sad to relate, are rotten. I am the only officer with the force who knows the interior of German East and I have placed my views on paper before Aitken. His answer is that the German is worse than we are, his troops are ill trained, ours are magnificent and bush or no bush he means to thrash the Germans before Christmas. Fine words, but I know the German. His colonial troops are second to none, they are well led by the best officers in the world, he knows the country and understands bush warfare and his men are not so prone to malaria as ours are.²⁶

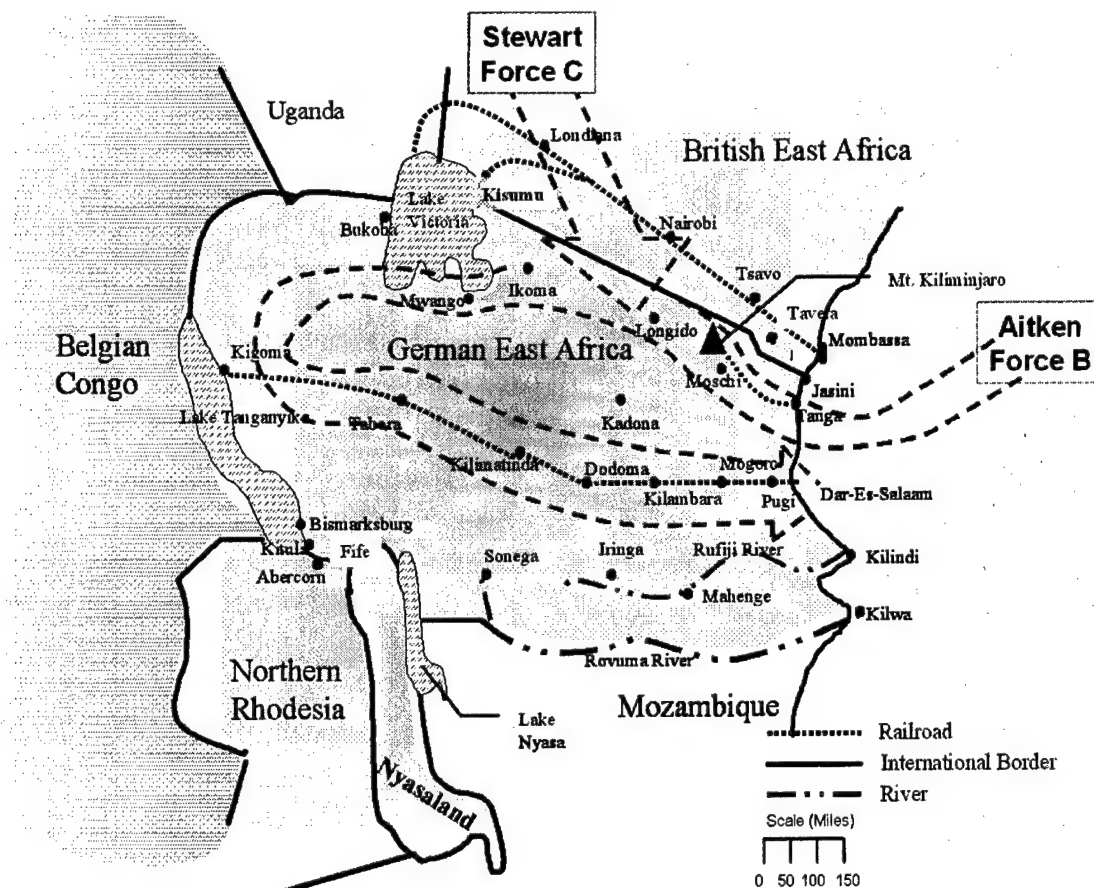


Figure 5. British Plan of Attack

On 3 November 1914, Brigadier General Stewart's Force C, consisting of 1,500 men including the East African Mounted Rifles, four cannon, and six machine guns encountered Major Georg Kraut's command of 80 Germans with 600 *Askari* near the town of Longido.²⁷ The attack was intended to distract the *Schutztruppe* from the main attack at Tanga. The Germans, who knew of the large force moving toward Tanga, were well prepared for the attack. They quickly defeated Force C, which was suffering from lack of water due to the breakdown of their transportation, then moved southeast to Moschi to help with the defense of Tanga. The Indian and British soldiers of Force C were so unaccustomed to war in the bush that at one point they staged an attack on a

troop of baboons, in the mistaken belief that they were a patrol of German soldiers creeping along the rocks at night.²⁸ Their fear of the bush and quick defeat by an "inferior" enemy completely demoralized the soldiers of Force C and furthered the legend of von Lettow-Vorbeck.²⁹

Von Lettow-Vorbeck anxiously anticipated the landing at Tanga. An attack on the supposedly neutral port would further his cause of carrying out the war in Africa and bleeding troops from the European fronts. He fervently hoped the attack would change the attitude of the people and the colonial government.³⁰ Although Dr. Schnee was still against action in the port city, he allowed von Lettow-Vorbeck to station one company of *Schutztruppe* in Tanga after von Lettow-Vorbeck offered the excuse that, "use of Tanga lodgings seems advisable in view of its healthy climate."³¹ This company, combined with an additional eight companies at the other end of the railroad, provided the force for the defense of Tanga.

The British were indeed planning a large landing at Tanga. In early October of 1914, crates along the docks in Bombay marked "Indian Expeditionary Force B, Mombassa, East Africa" were being loaded onto troop ships. Newspapers in Mombassa told of an impending attack on the port of Tanga. German natives who had remained in the British territory wrote to their friends and family in the south of the upcoming attack.³² Despite the shelling of Dar-Es-Salaam, continued fighting along the frontier and rumors of further impending belligerent acts, Dr. Schnee remained adamant that the port of Tanga would remain open. To underscore this requirement, he sent von Lettow-Vorbeck a telegram ordering, "You are forbidden to subject Tanga and its defenseless subjects to the rigors of war."³³ He had made arrangements with the Captain of the HMS

Astrea ensuring Tanga and Dar-Es-Salaam remained neutral through the war and intended to honor his commitment. Von Lettow-Vorbeck believed that due to the strategic value of Tanga he must disobey orders. "I had to ask myself whether I dared risk a decisive engagement with my thousand rifles . . . limited considerations such as the Governor's order to avoid a bombardment of Tanga under all circumstances could not prevail."³⁴

The British Army also had little compunction about breaking the truce. The 17 August agreement between the Captain of the *Astrea* and Dr. Schnee had been declared invalid by London. However, the British Navy believed it would be dishonorable to break the treaty without warning.³⁵ To remedy the situation, Captain F. W. Caudefield of the HMS *Fox* steamed ahead of the British convoy to arrive in Tanga at 0705 on 2 November. He informed Herr Auracher, the city commissioner, that the treaty had been declared invalid, asked if the harbor was mined, and gave him one hour to surrender the town.³⁶ Auracher, a reserve captain in the German Army, had already been activated by von Lettow-Vorbeck and absolved of any responsibility to follow the orders of Dr. Schnee.³⁷ He told Captain Caudefield that he had to check with his superiors, disembarked the *Fox*, put on his *Schutztruppe* uniform, advised von Lettow-Vorbeck of the situation and joined Major Kraut's force with his fifteen *Askari* policemen.³⁸ After two and a half hours of waiting, Captain Caudefield realized that his terms had been deemed unacceptable to the Germans and returned to the fleet. However, the battle would not begin immediately. Although the mines were merely a German ruse, the Navy demanded to sweep of the harbor, forcing Major General Aitken to set the attack for the next day, 3 November.³⁹

Meinertzhagen was beside himself with rage. He wrote, "To give the Germans 24 hours notice of attack seems criminal."⁴⁰ Von Lettow-Vorbeck used the extra day to rail troops from Kilimanjaro to Tanga. When Meinertzhagen expressed his opinion to General Aitken, he was ignored.

General Aitken firmly believed that, "The Indian Army will make short work of a lot of niggers."⁴¹ An officer of the old school, his primary concern was for correct dress. He imbued this concern in his commanders and staff, most of whom he met only days before embarking on the journey to Africa, with his first order: "I will not tolerate the appalling sloppiness in dress allowed during the late war with the Boers."⁴² He regularly ignored offers of help. In Mombassa, an officer of the KAR offered to bring a battalion of his troops to aid in the fight. Aitken turned down this offer with the admonishment, "bush or no bush, I mean to thrash the Germans before Christmas."⁴³ Meinertzhagen expressed his disappointment, "It was my old battalion accustomed to bush warfare and I was enthusiastic. But Aitken refused without a word of thanks. I was disgusted."⁴⁴ When the Captain of the battleship *Goliath*, who had escorted the force from India to Mombassa offered to provide gunfire, Aitken likewise declined.⁴⁵ He later informed his officers, "From reliable information received, it appears improbable that the enemy will actively oppose our landing." On 3 November, after the port had been swept for mines, Aitken waited until nightfall to land, giving the German forces eight more valuable hours to prepare. His final order to his landing force was to dress correctly.⁴⁶

At nightfall, three of the thirteen ships of Expeditionary Force B offloaded their troops into landing craft about a mile offshore Tanga. The troops, none of whom had been off ship in over three weeks, were tired and seasick. Three hundred meters from

shore, the landing boats dropped the men, most of whom could not swim, into chest deep water. Mangrove roots grabbed their feet as they waded onto a shore boasting a fifty-foot-high rock cliff topped by thorn bushes, thick grass, and saw palmetto trees.

Meanwhile the bulk of the force, over eight thousand men, remained ten miles offshore to prevent enemy bombardment of their ships.⁴⁷ Although many men were ashore by midnight, most were not ready to fight until the next day, 4 November. A brigade of troops sent on the third by Aitken to quickly dislodge the Germans from Tanga was soundly defeated with appalling losses.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, von Lettow-Vorbeck continued to prepare his defense.

As stated by Captain Meinertzhagen, the troops were of the poorest quality in India. The Indian units of the "Martial Castes," such as *Sikhs*, *Pothars*, *Dogras* and *Gurkhas*, had been sent to Europe or placed on the Indian border. The troops remaining, often personal guards or police troops, were second-class citizens in their own provinces, such as the *Tamils* or *Madrassi*, who were not accustomed to fighting.⁴⁹ As expected by Meinertzhagen, they failed to distinguish themselves.

At 2:00 pm on 4 November, an *Askari* reported to von Lettow-Vorbeck, "*Adui tayari*" -- "the enemy is ready."⁵⁰ Forty minutes later,⁵¹ the handful of *Schutztruppe* defending Tanga, numbering less than two hundred Germans and *Askari*, could see at least three battalions of infantry marching toward them. As fighting began, the quality of the different units before them became obvious. The British troops of the 101st Grenadiers and the Loyal North Lancashire Regiment (Loyal North Lancs) advanced successfully. The Indian troops broke and ran. In their panic, the troops of the Indian regiments opened fire on the Loyal North Lancs, slowing the British attack.⁵² One

terrified Indian officer brandished his sword in an attempt to attack Captain Meinertzhagen, but was met by a bullet from the intelligence officer's sidearm.⁵³ It was during this fight that the battle for Tanga earned its other name: "The Battle of the Bees." As the troops ran blindly through the bush to the ocean shooting at anything that could possibly be an enemy, they upset several hives of bees. The enraged bees reacted as might be expected, stinging everything in the area. Later, the British would accuse the Germans of deliberately using trained bees as a weapon,⁵⁴ a claim the Germans vehemently denied. Years after the war, Sir Arthur "Bomber" Harris would jokingly remark, "The intervention of those bees cost us £150,000, 250,000 casualties, and three years [actually four] of war in East Africa."⁵⁵ One member of the Loyal North Lincs reported during the fight that, "We don't mind the German fire, but with most of our officers and non commissioned officers down and a bloody crowd of niggers firing into our back and bees stinging our backsides, things are a bit 'ard'."⁵⁶

Despite the flight of the southern units, those in the north made a credible showing against the German *Askari*. As the *Askari* were close to retreating, their enraged commander Captain Alexander von Hammerstein threw an empty wine bottle at them. The *Askari* found this so amusing in the face of battle that they remained to repulse the British attack.⁵⁷ British troops rooted out pockets of German resistance, pushing back German lines until troops of Force B were in the town of Tanga proper. Suddenly, the British advance stopped. *Schutztruppe* soldiers who had been waiting four miles west of Tanga began to arrive along with reinforcements from Moschi. The center of the German position held--then slowly began driving the British back.⁵⁸ Although his officers believed the battle could still be won, Aitken ordered a "good night's sleep."⁵⁹

Meinertzhagen wrote of his revulsion toward Aitken. "He was tired and seemed disgusted with the whole thing. His one ambition was to get away. He was beaten."⁶⁰ By evening, the Germans had pushed the British to a small position along the Indian Ocean.⁶¹

That night, unaware of the extent of the German victory, von Lettow-Vorbeck decided to attempt some personal reconnaissance. He mounted his bicycle and began touring the town. As he drove through Tanga, he became so absorbed in the bloodshed and carnage that he failed to notice a British patrol led by Captain Meinertzhagen. The men of the patrol fired. Von Lettow-Vorbeck returned fire. Everyone missed.⁶² In one of the great ironies of the war, the two men who played the greatest role in the conduct of the war in East Africa, both crack shots, missed the opportunity to cripple their opponent. After the war, von Lettow-Vorbeck remarked, "This was my first social contact with my friend Meinertzhagen."⁶³

The next morning, Meinertzhagen approached the German lines carrying a white flag of truce. During the night, General Aitken had ordered the Captain of the *Fox* to shell German positions. Some shells landed on the hospital, which was full of British and German soldiers. Meinertzhagen bore a letter of apology from Aitken and supplies for the wounded. While behind the German lines, he also arranged for a one day pause to attend to the wounded, dead, and dying. As Meinertzhagen was wined and dined in the German camp, Aitken took the opportunity to load his soldiers back onto the ships. On 6 November von Lettow-Vorbeck visited Meinertzhagen to inform him that *Schutztruppe* guns had arrived, and it was time for Meinertzhagen to leave. Although the British had left the town, von Lettow-Vorbeck realized he could not hold it and ordered it evacuated. When the British returned, only a few dead soldiers remained.⁶⁴ To add insult to injury,

when Indian Expeditionary Force B returned to Mombassa, the customs agents of the town would not allow them to dock until they paid the required 5 percent port tax. Meinertzhagen handled that problem with a loaded pistol and forceful language.⁶⁵

The cost of Tanga was borne primarily by the British. Of 8,000 men participating in the attack, the British lost 360 known dead, including half of their officers, 300 wounded, and 1,800 missing or prisoner. In material costs, Force B lost 455 modern rifles, 16 machine guns, and 600,000 rounds of ammunition, as well as clothing, tents and blankets. The Germans quickly appropriated these supplies. The *Schutztruppe* lost 15 Europeans, including Captain von Prince, and 54 *Askari*.⁶⁶ General Tighe, attempting to explain his defeat, estimated the German strength at about 2,500 rifles. Meinertzhagen's estimate was greatly different. "Tighe estimates the enemy strength at 2,500 rifles, but from what I saw, I should say it was more like 250 with four machine guns."⁶⁷

There were other costs from the debacle at Tanga. Major General Aitken was sacked (replaced by Brigadier General Wapshire), reduced to the rank of colonel, and placed on half-pay for the remainder of the war. In his report to the War Office, he vastly overestimated the strength of the defenders, reporting that the Germans had been reinforced by reservists from Australia and China. Due to the overwhelming power of the Germans, he recommended a defensive policy in the region. The War Office concurred.⁶⁸ The loss was devastating to British morale. Not only did the civilians mock them, but von Lettow-Vorbeck seemed larger than life. Within a week, a poem began circulating in the town of Mombassa chronicling the battle.

Steaming down to Tanga
Over the briny main,
See our Major General

And his brilliant train.
Three Brigade Commanders,
Colonels, staff galore
Majors count for little,
Captains they ignore

Armored trains and sleepers
Guns of different bores.
Telephones and Mess plate,
Hospitals and stores,
Medicos in thousands
Anxious to avoid
Work outside the units
Where they are employed.

Earnestly they study
Each his little book
Which, compiled in Simla,
Tells him where to look.
Local knowledge needed?
Native scouts of use?
For so quaint a notion
There is small excuse.

See them shortly landing
At the chosen spot,
Find the local climate
Just a trifle hot.
Foes unsympathetic
Maxims on them train
Careful first by signal
Range to ascertain.

Ping, ping go the bullets,
Crash explode the shells,
Major-Generals worried
Think it just as well
Not to move too rashly
While he's in the dark.
What's the strength opposing?
Orders re-embark

Back to old Mombassa
Steams "B" Force again.
Are these generals ruffled?

Not the slightest grain.
Martial regulations
Inform us day by day,
They may have fozzled Tanga
But they've taken BEA.⁶⁹

As ordered, Brigadier General Wapshire placed the colony on a defensive status. The next year and a half was characterized by small raids interspersed with a few pitched fights. The war in East Africa became a duel between von Lettow-Vorbeck and Meinertzhagen.

War in the region was not confined to the land. Although there was little action off the coast of Africa, there were naval battles in the rivers and lakes of the colony early in the war. After a quick departure from the shores of German East Africa at the beginning of the war, Captain Loof in the *Königsberg* enjoyed a successful two months lurking along the coast and attacking British shipping. In mid-October, as she ran out of coal, Captain Loof decided to run her up the Rufji River until he could find another source. On 20 October a British scout spied her mainmast among the trees. Aware he had been found, Captain Loof steamed her further into the river hoping to hide. His effort proved to be futile as he was again found. The HMS *Fox* steamed upriver and began a bombardment of the *Königsberg* on 30 November. Again Loof moved upriver until he could go no further. There he remained for eight months locked in a stalemate with the captain of the *Fox*. As the staring contest persisted, a strange bond grew between the crews of the two warships. On Christmas day of 1914, the crew of the *Fox* floated a message upriver to the crew of the *Königsberg*. "We wish you a happy Christmas and New Year and we hope to see you soon." Loof's reply was congenial. "Thanks. Same to you. If you wish to see me, I am always at home." Finally, on 6 July the river monitors

Mersey and *Severn* were brought upriver to attack. By this time, Captain Loof knew his ship would never see open water again. He had released upwards of one-third of his crew to serve in the Army and begun offloading his weapons and ammunition. His big six-inch guns remained and destroyed one of the two guns of the *Mersey*. On 11 July the two monitors attacked again. As was often the case in East Africa, success came with a price. The *Königsberg* was low on ammunition and could not maintain the barrage of gunfire she had previously employed. After a direct hit on her main deck, Captain Loof ordered her guns removed and the *Königsberg* scuttled. Although destroyed, her memory would live on through the remaining years of the war. Her guns were refitted for use on land and manned by the remaining members of her crew.⁷⁰

The other major naval struggle occurred on Lake Tanganyika. Since the opening days of the war, the lake had been under German control. The British War Office deemed the lake to be of such great importance that they ordered Commander Spicer-Simpson to haul two fast, well-armed ships inland to regain control.⁷¹ Spicer-Simpson, an eccentric, tattooed officer with a fondness for wearing skirts, took the challenge eagerly.⁷² Starting from Capetown, he hauled the boats north to the Congo free states over some of the most forbidding terrain imaginable. During the march, his party traveled over 2,300 miles through bush, jungle, savannah, and mountains, summiting a 6,000-foot pass using tractors and winches. The final 400 miles of the journey required the boats, which were hauled in pieces, to be floated upriver on barrels.⁷³ The boats were reassembled in Albertville, and in a series of short, almost anticlimactic battles, gained control of Lake Tanganyika.⁷⁴

With the exception of a large battle at Jasin, the remainder of the initial phase consisted of battles of hit and run. Although the *Schutztruppe* won the battle of Jasin, one-seventh of its officers were killed. Von Lettow-Vorbeck realized he could not continue in such a manner. Four more such "successes" and he would be forced to surrender. He turned to an exclusively guerrilla war.⁷⁵

A similar epiphany came to the British commander through the Imperial War Office. At Jasin, the British suffered 500 casualties in a battle that was unauthorized by the War Office, provoking Lord Kitchener to send a message to General Wapshire. "You are entirely mistaken to suppose that offensive operations are necessary. The experience at Jasin shows that you are not well informed of the strength of your enemy. . . . [Y]ou should concentrate your forces and give up risky expeditions."⁷⁶

The contest in the region now became a test of wits between von Lettow-Vorbeck and Meinertzhagen. Meinertzhagen was a ruthless and competent intelligence officer. T. E. Lawrence, also known as Lawrence of Arabia, was a friend of Meinertzhagen, who described him in his book, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. "He knows no half measures. . . . [He] took as blithe a pleasure in deceiving the enemy by some unscrupulous jest as in splattering the brains of a cornered mob of Germans with one of his African knob-kerries."⁷⁷ Von Lettow-Vorbeck credited him for keeping the war alive, stating that if not for him there would be too much apathy, which was not good for the soldiers.⁷⁸

At the beginning of the war, Force B boasted little in the way of military intelligence. After the debacle at Tanga, removal of General Aitken and subsequent appointment of Brigadier General Wapshire to command the Army, Meinertzhagen set out to fix the shortfall. General Wapshire was an ineffective commander who became

increasingly terrified of von Lettow-Vorbeck as the war dragged on.⁷⁹ Because of this fear, which was so strong that it would make him shiver, Wapshire was willing to allow Meinertzhagen to do anything to disrupt the actions of his German counterpart. Meinertzhagen began by enlisting all available white hunters, local scouts, and natives as part of his intelligence corps.⁸⁰ Within months his ranks swelled with famous white hunters, such as Bror von Blixen, John Boyes--who referred to himself as "King of the WaKikuyu," elephant specialist "Flash Jack" Riddell, and R. J. Cunninghame, who had gained fame as Teddy Roosevelt's white hunter.⁸¹ These men provided sorely needed knowledge of the land, bushcraft, and reconnaissance ability which was lacking in the British Army.⁸² Realizing the power of the public backing of von Lettow-Vorbeck, Meinertzhagen began a campaign to destroy his reputation, accusing him of using females as frontline soldiers and circulating a story that some of his officers had killed themselves out of fear of their commander.⁸³ In an attempt to devalue the German war currency, he had several million twenty rupee notes printed and distributed in German East Africa.⁸⁴ To destroy the morale of the soldiers on the march, he placed dead birds and signs reading "Danger, Poison" around all wells.⁸⁵ Despite all his efforts, the *Schutztruppe* proved unstoppable.

Although von Lettow-Vorbeck was regularly attacking British positions and Meinertzhagen was doing what he could to disrupt the Germans, there was almost no action south of the colonial border. Realizing the potential for a protracted war, von Lettow-Vorbeck used the period of relative British inactivity to resupply his troops and provision them for future operations against the British. He commented on the extreme difficulty of provisioning an army in the bush, saying "The march and supply of a single

company in the conditions there prevailing require about the same consideration as would a division in Germany.”⁸⁶ Von Lettow-Vorbeck began by enlarging his army. With an eye on placing a fixed number of men of European descent in each company, he raised the number of companies in his command to sixty, meanwhile increasing the number of men in each company from 160 to 200.⁸⁷ He made what he needed from the jungle. His troops built looms and spinning wheels to work the native cotton into cloth, refined dye from the *mdaa* tree to stain the cloth into a color close to that of the *Schutztruppe* uniform, vulcanized rubber from native rubber plants to make tires for cars and bicycles, and made petroleum, in the form of trefol alcohol from coconut plants. He distilled quinine, which became known as “Lettow schnapps” from the bark of a native tree and made boots and shoes from the hides of whatever animal could be found.⁸⁸ To move the supplies south, he began construction of a railroad, adding 1.25 miles of track per day. By the end of 1915, he commanded a force of sixty well-trained *Schutztruppe* companies totaling 2,998 Europeans and 11,300 *Askari*.⁸⁹

While reprovisioning his army, he refused to allow the British troops to rest. He was still intent on bringing as many British troops into the theater as possible to draw them from the European fight. Eschewing large battles, von Lettow-Vorbeck concentrated on destroying railways, dams, and other symbols of British power. In one period between March and May of 1915, the British lost thirty-two trains and nine bridges to German action.⁹⁰

The Germans were aided in their task by the inability of the British troops. Meinertzhagen underscored some of the problems:

Owing to the increasing number of attempts by the enemy to blow up our trains on the Uganda Railway, all trains now travel at only fifteen miles an hour on the straight and at five miles an hour on the curve. Engines are preceded by a truck loaded with sand to explode mines laid out by German patrols. Bridge guards are now at every bridge, but as they are composed entirely of the 98th Infantry, whose fighting qualities are nil, and as no precautions have been taken by any post to clear a field of fire, the posts are quite useless. When one passes them, the men are lounging about, often without a sentry, and in many cases there is no attempt to dig a trench or build up head-cover. The Germans would have no difficulty in blowing up any bridge they wished to.⁹¹

Von Lettow-Vorbeck's reputation for invincibility grew as well, fueling the already superstitious soldiers' fear. Wapshire was relieved of command in April 1915, to be replaced by Brigadier General Tighe.⁹² Although considered a fighter, Tighe also succumbed to the pressure of having a substandard force and an undesirable mission. By 1916, when he was relieved, he was continually drunk, as sobering up would have caused delirium tremens.⁹³ Von Lettow-Vorbeck was reportedly, "delighted to have such men as enemies."⁹⁴

As local politicians kibitzed in Nairobi, searching for a reason for defeat, respect for their soldiers began to plummet. The British newspaper in the capital, *The Leader* wrote, "Even the head of our intelligence section boasts a German name."⁹⁵ When Meinertzhagen had the editor thrown in jail for his comment, relations between the civilians and the military hit a low mark. Remarks, such as those in *The Leader*, did little to bolster the ever-plunging morale of the military. Following the descent of morale, desertions in the British Army became commonplace. The EAMR went from an initial high of 1,166 men to 40.⁹⁶

Meanwhile, the Germans were enjoying success, even receiving a commendation from the *Kaiser* for their victory in Tanga. Their morale was high.

Ready to turn the theater over to the South Africans, Lord Kitchener requested that General Louis Botha assume command of operations in East Africa. Botha was busy with a political campaign, but recommended General Jan Smuts, a hero of the Boer War, for the command. Kitchener concurred and on 19 February 1916, Smuts arrived at Mombassa, bringing with him thousands of Boer soldiers and a new phase to the war.⁹⁷

German success in this phase can be attributed to many factors, but at the forefront are the morale and training of German troops and the leadership and vision of their commander. The German force quickly became a truly integrated unit. Far from the early predictions of iron bonds, the true bond of the *Schutztruppe* was one of respect and friendship. By mid-1915, black native noncommissioned officers could be found in charge of European soldiers.⁹⁸ The *Schutztruppe* became the nucleus of a new tribe for African soldiers, to which they pledged their honor. The soldiers' wives and children followed and were cared for by the medical personnel of the *Schutztruppe*. *Askari* loyalty was absolute while the British continued to scorn the natives as unreliable. Their troops were mainly uneducated men from India, unfamiliar with and scared of Africa. The African colonials of European descent who served as irregulars were generally not trusted.

Training in the *Schutztruppe* concentrated on teaching what was necessary for victory. The natives were not taught how to fight like a German in Europe, but to use European weapons to enhance their natural abilities in the bush. When they fought, they fought like Africans, not Germans. The British soldiers relied on manuals written and printed in India describing how to fight in Africa. While the *Schutztruppe* were all

volunteers who thought themselves elite, most of the British were Indian conscripts who barely considered themselves soldiers.

The impact of leadership cannot be ignored. From his first day on the shores of Africa, von Lettow-Vorbeck had a vision of what he wanted to achieve in East Africa. This vision allowed him to take the initiative and force the British commanders, who had no plan, to react to his moves. The British commanders were of poor quality and unable to match wits with one of Germany's top officers. Prisoners of their backgrounds, they refused to take the advice of their subordinates or deviate from what they thought was the "British way." The Germans, however, put whoever was best in charge. In 1916, von Lettow-Vorbeck, a lieutenant colonel at the outbreak of war, had as his four main subordinates a major general, major, count, and naval captain (Max Loof of the *Königsberg*); all placed due to their competence. He was able to convey his vision to all members of his command, so everyone understood why they were fighting. Whether they agreed or not (Captain Loof was partial to the frontal assault), they respected von Lettow-Vorbeck's ability and followed his decisions.

With the arrival of General Smuts, von Lettow-Vorbeck's wish would come true. The war in East Africa would expand, sucking in more valuable troops who could have been sent to other fronts. However, with additional enemy troops and competent enemy leadership, his tactics would have to change. A new phase of war was beginning. The hunter was about to become the hunted.

¹Brian Herne, *White Hunters, the Golden Age of African Safaris* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, LLC, 1999), 96.

²Geoffrey King, "A Study of the German Operations in German East Africa During the World War, 1914-1918" (Fort Leavenworth, KS: The Command and General Staff School), 1930. 4.

³Ibid.

⁴Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guerilla! Colonel Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981), 16.

⁵Frank A Contey, "British Debacle in German East Africa," *Military History* 13, no. 5 (December 1996): 65.

⁶Ibid.

⁷G. G. Parks, "A Critical Analysis of the Operations in German East Africa" (Individual research paper, Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1934), 6-7.

⁸Barry Taylor, "Prussian Jungle Tactics," *Military History*, 1991, 1.

⁹Paul E von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1920), 28.

¹⁰Ibid., 40.

¹¹Hoyt, 17-18.

¹²Geoffrey King, "A Study of the German Operations in German East Africa During the World War, 1914-1918" (Individual Research Paper, Command and General Staff School, Fort Leavenworth, KS), 1930, 3.

¹³Ibid., 4.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Parks, 9.

¹⁶Byron Farwell, *The Great War in Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 125.

¹⁷Hoyt, 23.

¹⁸King, 4.

¹⁹Farwell, 125.

²⁰Edmund Dane, *British Campaigns in Africa and the Pacific, 1914-1918* (London, New York, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), 84.

²¹*Ibid.*, 90-93.

²²*Ibid.*, 95.

²³Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 35.

²⁴Parks, 10.

²⁵Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974), 56.

²⁶Richard Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 84.

²⁷Farwell, 161.

²⁸Herne, 102.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 162.

³⁰Hoyt, 26.

³¹*Ibid.*, 28.

³²Farwell, 166.

³³Hoyt, 59.

³⁴Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 40.

³⁵Contey, 3.

³⁶Farwell, 166-7.

³⁷Leonard Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro, Africa 1914-1918: The Dramatic Story of an Unconventional War* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1963), 52.

³⁸Miller, 59.

³⁹Contey, 6.

⁴⁰Meinertzhagen, 88.

⁴¹Miller, 58.

⁴²Contey, 4.

⁴³Farwell, 165.

⁴⁴Meinertzhagen, 85.

⁴⁵Farwell, 165.

⁴⁶Contey, 6.

⁴⁷Ibid., 1.

⁴⁸Mosley, 58.

⁴⁹Ibid., 5.

⁵⁰Ibid., 8.

⁵¹Meinertzhagen, 87.

⁵²Contey, 9.

⁵³Meinertzhagen, 92.

⁵⁴Farwell, 172.

⁵⁵Ibid., footnote.

⁵⁶Meinertzhagen, 94.

⁵⁷Farwell, 171.

⁵⁸Miller, 67.

⁵⁹Mosley, 64.

⁶⁰Meinertzhagen, 95.

⁶¹Contey, 10.

⁶²Gardner, 57-58; and Meinertzhagen, 93.

⁶³Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Mein Leben* (My Life) (Biberach an der Riss: Koehlers Verlagsgesellschaft, 1957), 129; and Meinertzhagen, 93.

⁶⁴Contey, 10.

⁶⁵Meinertzhagen, 106.

⁶⁶Contey, 11.

- ⁶⁷Meinertzhagen, 84.
- ⁶⁸Gardner, 69.
- ⁶⁹Meinertzhagen, 119-120.
- ⁷⁰James Burbeck, "The Last Voyage of the Konigsburg," *War Times Journal*; available from <http://www.richtoven.com/konigsberg/> ; Internet; accessed 1 October 2002.
- ⁷¹King, 6.
- ⁷²Farwell, 230.
- ⁷³Ibid.
- ⁷⁴King, 6.
- ⁷⁵Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 63.
- ⁷⁶Gardner, 72.
- ⁷⁷T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 393.
- ⁷⁸Mosley, 91.
- ⁷⁹Ibid., 73.
- ⁸⁰Meinertzhagen, 126.
- ⁸¹Herne, 99.
- ⁸²Meinertzhagen, 127.
- ⁸³Farwell, 192-196.
- ⁸⁴Meinertzhagen, 164.
- ⁸⁵Ibid., 131.
- ⁸⁶Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 30.
- ⁸⁷Ibid., 71.
- ⁸⁸King, 5.
- ⁸⁹Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 71.

⁹⁰Keithly, 172.

⁹¹Meinertzhagen, 124.

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Meinertzhagen, 158.

⁹⁴Keithly, 173.

⁹⁵Farwell, 195.

⁹⁶Herne, 95; and Mosley, 74.

⁹⁷Farwell, 253.

⁹⁸Ibid., 192.

CHAPTER 4

PHASE 2: A STALEMATE NO MORE: GENERAL SMUTS ATTACKS FEBRUARY 1916--JANUARY 1917

In late 1915, the British Government found itself at a crossroads in the Great War. The war was not turning out as planned. The battle of Loos had resulted in 80 percent casualties for the British. Mesopotamia was also proving to be more difficult than anyone had expected. The Germans were pushing slowly east in Russia, and Gallipoli had become an unbreakable stalemate. The War Office needed a victory.¹ After some deliberation, a subcommittee of the Committee for Imperial Defense determined East Africa would be the most likely front to provide success. The subcommittee recommended:

- (a) that steps should be taken "to ensure the conquest of this German colony with as little delay as possible";
- (b) that, accepting the general figure of 10,000 already suggested by the C.I.G.S.² [Chief Imperial General Staff] for the reinforcements necessary, a new Army brigade should be sent to East Africa to make up two complete brigades of white troops which, with the others already arranged for, would bring the total to 12,600.
- (c) that an adequate staff for the large numbers involved should be furnished from home.³

The memorandum also recommended that:

- (a) since the transport of troops must take time and the rains in the area affected would begin about April it was "desirable to move the Union Government to proffer further assistance to make sure of the success during the few weeks available"
- (b) Belgian cooperation was desirable and could only be secured "by placing a definite and consistent military policy before the Belgian military authorities."⁴

The suggestion was accepted by the British Government and on 22 November 1915, General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien was selected as the commander of the expedition against the Germans in East Africa.⁵

Sir Horace had participated in the earliest actions of the British Expeditionary Force in France, eventually rising to command the Second British Army. Although well regarded by his troops, his commander General Sir John French did not approve of his methods and dismissed him to assume command of the First Army for Home Defense in April 1915. The dismissal proved fortuitous for the troops in East Africa. When word reached them of Smith-Dorrien's appointment, they eagerly awaited the arrival of what they considered to be a top-notch fighting general.⁶

Smith-Dorrien did not disappoint. He quickly sketched out a rough plan for the conquest of German East Africa, tallying the requirements for men, equipment, and supplies. He proposed to attack the main German force at Kilimanjaro, while simultaneously attempting a landing at a port city, preferably Dar-Es-Salaam. When informed of the undertaking, Lord Kitchener, British Secretary for War, strongly opposed action, calling it, "a dangerous project in the present state of the war, when we require to concentrate all our efforts on defeating the Germans in Europe."⁷ Lord Kitchener was quickly overruled by Prime Minister Asquith's Government, and on 18 December Smith-Dorrien was formally appointed commander. On Christmas Eve, Smith-Dorrien sailed for South Africa feeling optimistic about the chances for success, despite having been granted only a portion of the supplies he felt necessary for defeat of the Germans. Unfortunately, he fell ill with pneumonia during the voyage and was forced to turn back from South Africa and relinquish command of the newly forming force. Doctors proclaimed he would never be able to contend with the climate and therefore would be unfit for command of the forces in East Africa.⁸

The question became one of whom to place in command of troops in the theater. Winston Churchill volunteered to become governor and assume command of the troops, but as he was only a major at the time, the request was denied.⁹ To ensure success, the campaign had to be underway before the rains began in April. The date required someone close to the area who could quickly assume command. Since the War Department viewed the conflict as an African problem, a South African was the logical choice. The Boer War hero South African General Louis Botha was offered the position, but due to an impending election campaign declined the offer. He did, however, have a recommendation. His right hand man, another South African hero of the Boer War named Jan Smuts, would be the perfect choice.¹⁰

Rumors had been circulating in South Africa that Smuts had been offered the position in late November 1915, but had refused in order to aid Botha in his political campaign. Once released by Botha, Smuts was happy to leave the political realm and live once again as a soldier.¹¹ On 10 February 1916, the British government formally announced that Smuts had been commissioned lieutenant general and accepted command of British forces in East Africa. At the time, he was the second youngest general in the British Empire. His Chief of Artillery, Brigadier General J. H. V. Crowe later said,

It was a bold stroke to entrust the command of these bodies of troops and the carrying out of these operations to a man who was not a soldier, who had practically no experience in handling any considerable force. Knowing what one does now, one can only say that the Government was wonderfully lucky, for it would have been difficult to have found a more suitable commander than General Smuts proved himself to be.¹²

General Crowe did, however, caveat his statement, "Lest other politicians should attempt a similar role, I would say that General Smuts was successful in spite of being a politician."¹³

General Smuts was referred to as "Slim Janie" by his troops. The word "slim" referred not to his size, as he was neither a corpulent nor slender man, but to the Dutch word for "sly." He had gained this nickname in the Boer war as a cagey guerrilla fighter. Smuts was nothing if not a complete contrast to the leadership in East Africa. The Bishop of Pretoria said of him, "Smuts fears neither God nor man, and particularly the former."¹⁴ Von Lettow-Vorbeck was ecstatic. The appointment of such a well-known man and commitment of so many troops meant that he had accomplished his task. In von Lettow-Vorbeck's mind, The British Empire was being sucked into Africa.

The eleventh of February, the day Smuts left South Africa to assume command of the British Forces in East Africa, was a busy one. In addition to Smuts's departure, Brigadier General Wilfred Malleon, with the approval of the War Office, attacked the prominent German defenses at Salatia.¹⁵ Although one could speculate that the intent of the fight was to lay a victory at the feet of the new commander, General Malleon, widely regarded as the least able general in East Africa and possibly the British Army, was not the man for the job.¹⁶ With 18 field guns, 41 machine guns, and 6,000 men, Malleon drew up the plan of attack, but from the beginning it went poorly. His shells, though accurately placed, fell on empty trenches.¹⁷ Malleon had relied on observation planes to give correct coordinates for the German positions. The Germans, realizing what was happening as the aircraft overflew their positions, simply moved their positions to the foot of the hill. As the shelling came to a conclusion, the cocky South African troops, believing everyone in the trenches dead, sauntered up the hill to complete the defeat. As they closed in on the trench, the 1,300 Germans, who also knew the location of the trench, rained accurate fire upon the exposed and unprepared South Africans. In the

ensuing rout, the previously unblooded South Africans left behind 170 men and most of their equipment, including their prized machine guns.¹⁸ But not all British forces gave such a poor showing. The 130th Baluchis, a unit from India whose ranks included many of the renowned Ghurka fighters, attacked into the German lines to retrieve the machine guns lost by the South Africans. The next day, they presented these guns to the commander of the notoriously prejudiced South African Brigade with a note reading, "With the compliments of the 130th Baluchis. May we request that you do not any longer refer to our *sepoys* as *coolies*."¹⁹

The *Official British History* attempts to explain the outcome:

The repulse at Salatia was undoubtedly a setback to the revived morale of the British forces . . . and in its effect on that of the German *Askari* its results were even more serious. Its lessons, however, were salutary. It brought out once again . . . the cardinal error of not ensuring adequate intercommunication and co-ordination between the two separated brigades. It gave the South Africans their first experience of bush fighting. It exemplified the unreliability of estimates of the enemy's strength not arrived at from good intelligence or close reconnaissance . . . and above all it demonstrated once again the fighting spirit and abilities of the enemy, impressing upon the South Africans a much-needed realization of the formidable qualities alike of Indian troops and of well-led *Askari* whom there had been at first a tendency to regard as "only native troops."²⁰

But as future events were to show, the *Official History* was optimistic in believing the British leaders were learning--and more importantly internalizing--lessons from the attack. It would take several months before the new soldiers would come to believe that the events on Salatia Hill were more than just an accident.

With the arrival of General Smuts on 19 February, the new phase of operations in East Africa truly began. From the moment he arrived, Smuts was a flurry of activity. Unlike his predecessors he was all business, immediately making a personal reconnaissance of the countryside from Mbuyuni to Longido, focusing on possible lines

of advance toward the British troops. Captain Meinertzhagen was impressed with the ability of his new commander. After an meeting with Smuts, he wrote, "He is a fascinating little man and one leaves him after an interview with the impression that he has a first class brain." He further stated, "Smuts grasps points at once and never wants telling a second time."²¹ Meinertzhagen's only concern was toward his commander's disdain for native troops. He confided that Smuts,

underrates the fighting qualities of the German native soldier. I warned him that in the bush he would find them as good as his South Africans. I told him bluntly that before he leaves this country he will have a great deal of respect for what he now terms "damned *kaffirs*." The Dutchman boasts that he can drive them with a whip. Before the campaign ceases there will be more than one instance of the *kaffirs* giving the Dutchman a licking.²²

On 23 February Smuts cabled London stating that he agreed with the plan laid out by Smith-Dorrien with a few changes. Like Smith-Dorrien, he believed that the offensive should start before the rainy season and be concentrated on the defenses at Kilimanjaro.²³ But events at Salatia and personal reconnaissance had convinced him another path was necessary. He stated, "The gap had to be forced at whatever cost. I preferred to manoeuvre the enemy out of it,"²⁴ Smuts believed that another frontal attack at Salatia would be suicide. He therefore decided on a two-pronged attack. A division under Major General Tighe would attack with 15,000 men through the Taveta Gap to turn von Lettow-Vorbeck's attention northeast. Simultaneously, Brigadier General Stewart's Division of four thousand men would attack from Longido through New Moschi and around Kilimanjaro to strike the German flank and cut off a retreat (figure 6).²⁵ Unlike Smith-Dorrien's plan, a simultaneous landing at Dar-Es-Salaam would not be necessary. With their commander captured by the encircling British forces, the remaining Germans would surely capitulate. Smuts confided in Meinertzhagen that he wished to avoid a stand-up

fight. He had seen too many people labeled "butcher" and could not afford the same epithet upon return to his home country. This fear influenced his attempt to maneuver the Germans out of their positions. Of this decision, Meinertzhagen wrote,

Manoeuvre is a peculiar form of war which I do not understand and which I doubt will succeed except at great expense in men and money. Every man killed in action means ten invalided with disease. . . . A decisive action in the Kilimanjaro area might finish the campaign, but a series of manoeuvres will only drag operations on for years. Von Lettow is concentrated here and ready for a fight, but of course he is not going to risk a decisive action against vastly superior numbers. Smuts should bring to battle and instead of manoeuvring him out of position should endeavor to surround and annihilate him, no matter what are our casualties.²⁶

Meinertzhagen was clearly concerned with Smut's inexperience in East Africa. Despite those concerns on 5 March, after little more than a fortnight in country, Smuts launched his attack.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck, however, was not sitting idly. He knew of the arrival of the new commander and observed him making preparations. After watching Smuts conducting his reconnaissance he wrote, "The general review of the situation showed that the enemy was making a detailed reconnaissance of the Usambara Railway and the approaches to it. A glance at the map shows that a simultaneous advance by the enemy from Oldorobo [the German name for Salatia Hill] and Longido towards New Moschi was bound to entail the loss of the Kalmia."²⁷ While working on Botha's staff, von Lettow-Vorbeck gained an enormous amount of admiration for the South African general. He believed that if Smuts was Botha's protégé, he must at least approach Smuts' ability.²⁸ Realizing that his small force of only 4,000 soldiers could not be expected to hold the position against such a leader and that his only line of retreat was down the

Usambara railroad, he would hold his position only long enough to bloody the British noses and retreat before an encircling force cut him off.²⁹

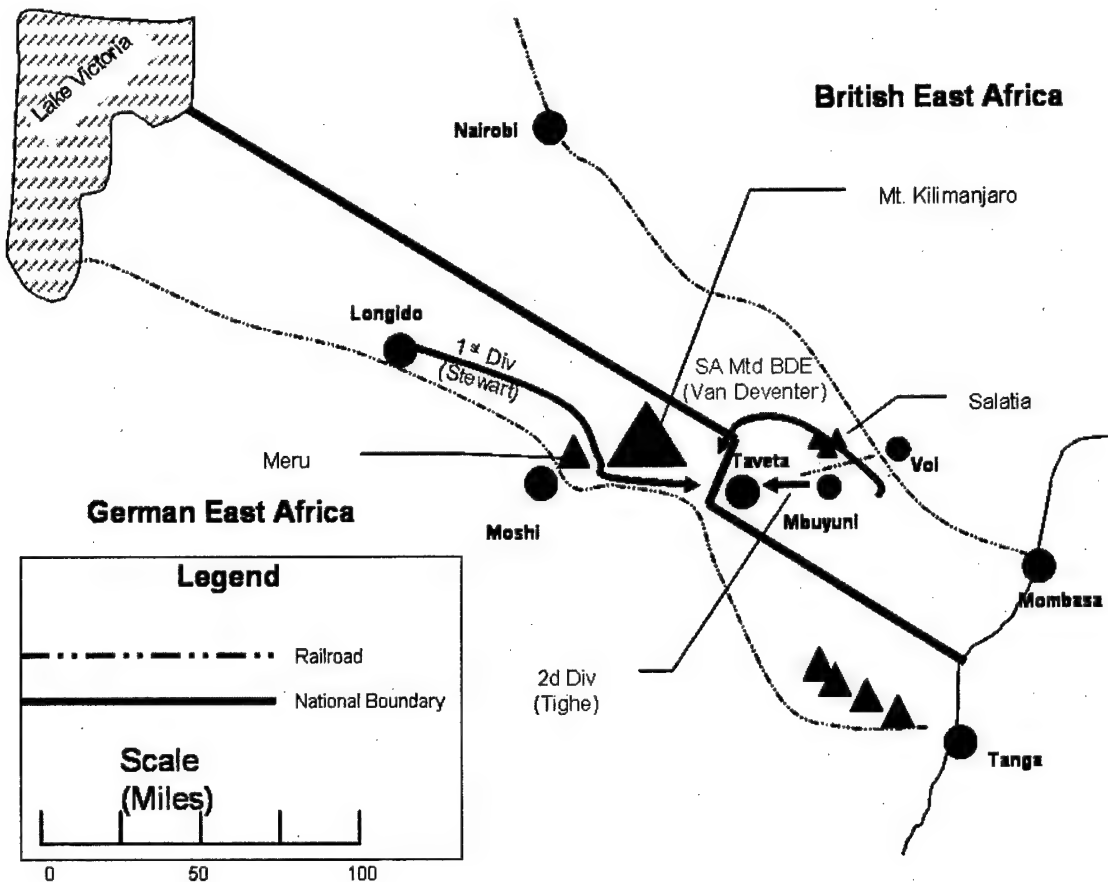


Figure 6. Smuts' Plan of Attack

His estimate was proven true early on the eighth when an Indian dispatch rider, lost in the jungle, delivered his dispatch to von Lettow-Vorbeck, instead of General Smuts. The dispatch confirmed that the First East African Division, under General Stewart, was moving toward the district. Later that day, observers in Oldorobo (Salatia) noticed clouds of dust moving from the enemy camp. Within hours, the German

headquarters could also discern the direction of the British movement. Even the British aircraft conspired to signal the route of attack, circling the country an hour north of Taveta.³⁰

From the beginning, the inexperience in jungle warfare of the British commanders was apparent. To complete his task, Stewart was forced to march the First Division through sixty miles of the most inhospitable terrain in the world.³¹ The jungle was a frightening place for most of his soldiers. That which did not eat men always seemed to send them in the direction of something that did. Due to this lack of expertise, the division proceeded carefully. The movement, which was supposed to end on the eighth, took until the fourteenth, exacerbating critical supply problems in food and water.³² When Stewart failed to make rendezvous on the eighth, Smuts, in a fit of rage, exploded, "I am now beginning to understand how it was that we always outwitted your leaders in South Africa. Are they all like that?"³³

Even though First Division had not yet arrived, Smuts decided to begin the attack. Still believing Stewart might arrive in time, he ordered General Tighe to bypass Salatia Mountain and push toward Taveta.³⁴ Tighe, who was so drunk that he was unable to function for two days, ordered General Malleson to lead the attack.³⁵ As in earlier battles, Malleson failed to distinguish himself and was sacked by General Smuts, who referred to him as a coward. The relief of Malleson began the polarization of the officers of the force along British and South African lines. Even Meinertzhagen wrote, "I dislike a Dutchman calling an English General a coward."³⁶ To relieve pressure on the division, Smuts ordered a brigade of South African cavalry, under Brigadier General Van Deventer to

attack around Salatia into the rear of Taveta. It was the dust from Van Deventer's movement that Von Lettow-Vorbeck and his troops observed.

As the division passed Salatia, they found the previously impregnable positions abandoned. A day later, after a minor skirmish, 2nd Division occupied Taveta.³⁷ The Germans had retreated down the Usambara railroad. Stewart's troops had failed to arrive to prevent their retreat. As the operation wore on, Smuts became increasingly livid with Stewart. Meinertzhagen stated, "Smuts is furious with him, as the man has made no effort to move quickly. Stewart is for home as soon as he crawls round Kilimanjaro. Poor Stewart, a great gentlemen, great charm, but a hopeless, rotten soldier. And we have no room here for that class."³⁸ Later, when Smuts informed him he was being relieved, Stewart exclaimed, "fired! Hell! I quit."³⁹ The *Official History* agrees that there may have been extenuating circumstances in the sluggishness of Stewart's movement, but cuts to the central point,

A more mobile force with only mountain artillery and light transport would certainly have got through more quickly. Nevertheless, the one vital necessity was that the 1st Divn. should arrive in time; and it is difficult to avoid the impression that this was not appreciated quite soon enough.⁴⁰

A dissenting opinion was voiced by Lord Cranworth, an officer in the 25th

Fusiliers (Frontiersmen),

In my judgment, injustice was done. I venture to doubt whether the result would have been all that the [generals] so definitely emphasized. Von Lettow . . . was far too astute to allow himself to be surrounded and captured in a vast broken country known intimately to him, but quite unknown to his opponent.⁴¹

Von Lettow-Vorbeck might have agreed. He watched the exhausted men of Stewart's division stumble through dense banana plantations eating unripe bananas, scrambling for any water they could find. They never saw him. This was his country, his plan, and his

initiative. Before retiring from the Kilimanjaro area, he brought his officers together, told them of his plan, and reminded them that they were in a guerrilla war.⁴²

As General Smuts expected, the Germans retreated along the railroad toward the town of Kahe. On 18 March as von Lettow-Vorbeck had expected, Smuts gave chase.⁴³ Von Lettow-Vorbeck proved particularly adept at baiting the enemy to lure him into a trap. Like a master chess player, he used his first move (Kilimanjaro) to set up another at Kahe. As he created his plan, he pondered his situation, writing,

All we could do with our four thousand rifles was to let the enemy run up against us on suitable ground, and, possibly, to take advantage of any mistakes he might make by skillful and rapid action; but the odds against us being seven to one we could attempt no more. From an attack on an enemy superior not only in number but also in equipment, and holding fortified positions into the bargain, I could not possibly hope for success.⁴⁴

With this consideration, he decided to portray strength in Kahe to entice the British into his trap. Knowing the cunning of his enemy, Smuts endeavored to outfox the fox. Believing von Lettow-Vorbeck would expect him to send his entire force down the railway; he sent them around both sides to find the German flanks. Von Lettow-Vorbeck was not fooled. When he sprung his trap, the British were hit hard, losing at least 290 men. Many of these casualties came from one of the *Königsberg's* guns. As the Germans retreated, the British captured the sabotaged gun, marveling at the ingeniousness of the setup.

Iron girders supported a heavy plank platform on which the gun was mounted as if on the deck of a ship. An observation post was in a kind of crows nest in the tallest tree, reached by a rope ladder. An observer remarked, "The labor of carrying the material from Kahe station and the labor of erection must have been colossal, one would think almost impossible."⁴⁵

The heavy bush helped the Germans by preventing communication between the British units. The Germans, who were more familiar with fighting in such closed-in

terrain, were largely unaffected and able to follow the advance of the enemy force.⁴⁶ The British attempting a flanking movement through the bush found it more unnerving. It was, however, water that was the decisive factor in the battle. Angus Buchanan, a sergeant with the 25th Fusiliers (Frontiersmen), described the aftermath of the battle. "In that bush forest, after dark, wandering parties unfamiliar with the encampment as it lay after the battle, seemed to be looking for every regiment, and water cart, and doctor in creation."⁴⁷

Soon the yearly deluge arrived, amazing even the South Africans with its torrential ferocity. For two months, there was no refuge from the continuous downpour--it quickly halted any actions for those who were unprepared, and allowed the Germans to break contact and move away from danger. Now was the time to plan, recuperate, and wait. With a victory in the Kilimanjaro region, Smuts could have declared victory, dug in, and stopped. Lord Kitchener believed he had done a commendable job. Enemy forces had been driven from British East Africa and a victory had been won. Smuts occupied German territory and its troops were on the run. But he did not stop. Believing there was much more to do, he drew up plans to be enacted after the rainy season ended.

Thinking von Lettow-Vorbeck would fight to hold the Central Railroad, Smuts' plan concentrated on a two-pronged attack to encircle and defeat the German forces as they defended the railroad. His plan was to send Van Deventer's force south across the Masai plain to Kodona Irangi, then to the central railway. Another force, commanded by Smuts, would move from Tanga through Morogoro to Dar-Es-Salaam. These two forces were to come together in a pincer grip to surround the Germans and force their surrender (figure 7). Should the wily German slip from their grip, the British would hold the most

economically viable portion of German East Africa as a base of operations against their foes.⁴⁸ Local Afrikaner settlers ensured Smuts that the rainy season would be short and confined mostly to the area around Kilimanjaro.⁴⁹ This information proved to be wrong. The Boer settlers frequently assisted the German commander, offering him intelligence and deceiving the British forces.

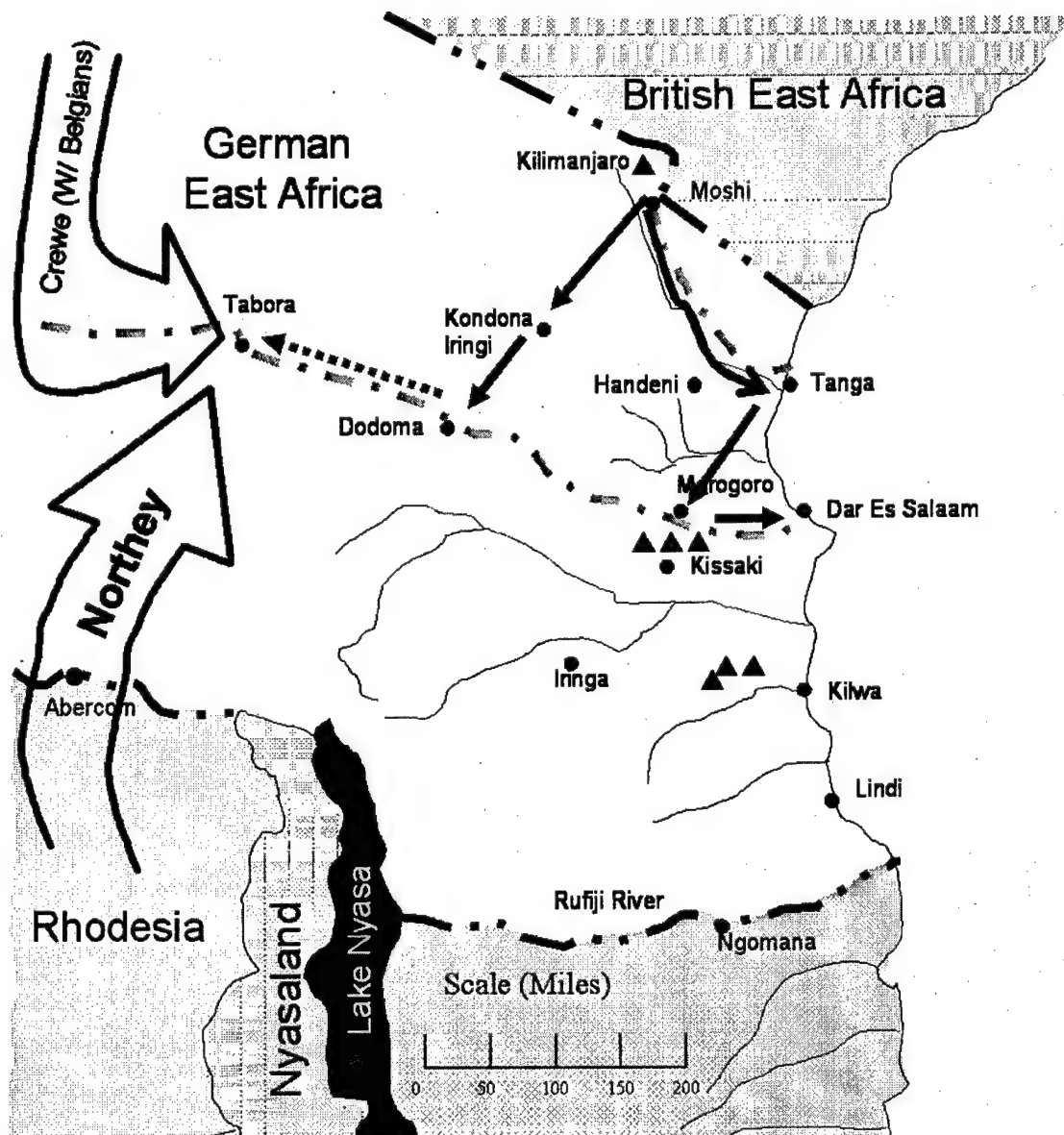


Figure 7. Smuts' New Plan of Attack Against the Central Railroad

Because the march through the Masai plains was judged to be longer and more difficult, Van Deventer's force left ahead of Smuts' force. On 3 April the mounted Brigade of the Second Division splashed southward toward the railroad.⁵⁰

Smuts was convinced that von Lettow-Vorbeck expected him to send his entire force down the railway to Tanga. He expected the Germans to disregard the advance through the Masai plains as unimportant and continue to concentrate their forces around Tanga in an attempt to regain the Northern Railway. Therefore, Van Deventer's march was to be decisive.⁵¹ Smuts was wrong. The Germans knew immediately of the British plan. On 4 April a reconnaissance patrol from Captain Otto's detachment in the Pare Mountains reported a clear view of the enemy camp. On 5 April Captain Rother's 28th *Schutztruppe* Company was attacked by the force at Loliksdale.⁵² With full knowledge of the whereabouts of the British, the Germans harassed Van Deventer's division in a series of hit and run attacks during the entire march. Van Deventer described the actions in a report to Smuts.

The fighting consisted of the enemy receiving our advanced guard with one of several ambushes through falling back on a well prepared position, and retiring from that on to a further selected ambush places and positions. All the time our less advanced troops were subjected to vigorous shelling by means of long range naval guns.⁵³

Von Lettow-Vorbeck would not let his enemy off with merely a series of small fights. The delaying engagements were intended to allow the main force of Germans to arrive at Kondona-Iringi ahead of the British. Having determined his enemy's intentions, von Lettow-Vorbeck decided to leave a small force in the Kilimanjaro country, taking the bulk of his force to meet the British. He stated,

The execution of this project was not quite easy; much time was needed to cover the distance of 125 miles from the detraining stations on the Northern Railway to

the Central Railway on foot, and at any moment a change in the situation might render it necessary for Headquarters immediately to make fresh dispositions.⁵⁴

The difficult march was completed, and the Germans, with 4,000 rifles, were arrayed in Kondona-Iringi to meet the British.

The Germans hardly needed to do anything to reduce British numbers. The land itself slaughtered hundreds. Within fourteen days, only 800 of the original 1,150 men of the South African Brigade were still effective. A week later, there were only 600 men. Of the 3,894 horses (to include remounts) that left Kilima, 1,639 had died.⁵⁵ Disease, exhaustion, and simple starvation took their toll on the men. Germans joked that one could find a British unit by following bloody feces from dysentery. The soldiers contended with jigger fleas, which burrowed into a man's feet and laid several million eggs. If not immediately extracted, toes would rot. Thousands of toes on both sides were amputated from this horrible affliction. Bott flies laid eggs in the soldiers' arms and backs, which grew into large white maggots that died, festered, and abscessed. The sand fly bite induced a three-day fever that was followed by three weeks of excruciating itching. *Draculunca* larvae were ingested with water. They then grew into long white worms that settled in the low points--legs, hands and testicles--of the men, then burrowed painfully out. Most men had malaria at some point, which although not fatal, reduced a man to fever and shakes for days at a time. Most dreaded of all was blackwater fever. A usually fatal subtype of malaria, it attacked a man's kidneys, turning the urine black with blood.⁵⁶

Under these terrible conditions both sides toiled. The Germans, however, were not afflicted by the diseases as often as their British counterparts. The German uniform consisted of a high collar, long puttees, and long sleeves. The uniform helped to ward off

bites from the insects that caused malaria and other diseases. German uniforms were in stark contrast to the British uniform of shorts and open shirt, which allowed frequent bites by disease-ridden vermin.⁵⁷ The rigid camp discipline of the Germans also aided in the prophylaxis. Simply boiling water killed most bacteria and larvae, including the *Dracunculus*. Germans were under orders not to sleep on the ground and rarely slept without mosquito netting.⁵⁸ The British forces disdained such necessities, to their eventual downfall. By time they reached Kodona-Irangi, van Deventer could only muster 3,000 men. Most of his horses, mules, oxen, and cattle were dead.⁵⁹

The Germans were still under observation as they approached Kondona-Iringi. On 9 May Major Kraut's forces attacked the British positions from prepared positions with fire from another of the *Königsberg*'s guns. The Boers initially refused to take cover, believing digging to be a miserable tactic. Meinertzhagen relates van Deventer's disdain for trenches.

"Are you well dug in?" I asked. No reply. "For God's sake do not despise the enemy," I said, "Damned kaffirs," says he and then adds to Nussey, "Are we dug in?" Nussey smiles at me and Van Deventer comes near a smile, Nussey was at Spion Kop, Van Deventer at Tugela Heights. If they had been at Paardeberg they would have more faith in trenches. I suspect the troops are not dug in.⁶⁰

The feeling changed quickly, as on 10 May, Meinertzhagen reported that "good trenches are being dug."⁶¹

With the digging of trenches, the fight deteriorated into an European style battle of attrition. In an interesting development, van Deventer ordered guns to counter those of the *Königsberg*. He was sent two guns from the British ship *Pegasus*, which had been destroyed in early fighting, setting the stage for an artillery fight of naval guns in the heart of East Africa.⁶² The fight lasted three weeks. In the end, von Lettow-Vorbeck

wrote, "It seemed, therefore, as though the enemy . . . adopted a sort of tactic of attrition. . . . Today he would attack with one portion of his force, then let that rest, and put in another the next day, and a different portion again on the third."⁶³ Realizing his inability to stand toe to toe with the British in a protracted fight, in early June von Lettow-Vorbeck ordered a retreat. The Germans faded away to predesignated rallying points around Morogoro to await further orders. General van Deventer was in no position to press an attack. On 3 June he sent the following telegram to General Smuts.

Following is the present situation in my division. Today 711 sick in hospital and 320 in convalescent camp. Lack of strengthening foods such as oatmeal, bacon, jam, cheese, milk, etc renders it almost hopeless to expect convalescents to get fit for active service. This is also the cause of a great amount of debilitation amongst troops. Every effort has been made during the last two months to get forward these essentials and there are not en route seven days' rations of which the greater part will get to hospitals. Empty lorries returning is the only means of evacuating our sick. The majority of men are lying on the ground in tent hospitals as there are no stretchers available. Infantry regiments for the most part arrived here without blankets--dearth of boots, clothing, soap--the very poor rations are the cause of the heavy sick rate. The nearest receiving hospital is at Ufiome. As it has no transport it cannot come forward. . . . If immediate steps are not taken the situation will become worse.⁶⁴

Still, the campaign wore on. On the same day Van Deventer sent his telegram, the British discovered that Portugal had declared war on Germany. This revelation was taken with a grain of salt as the fighting ability of the Portuguese was at best suspect.⁶⁵ A Belgian Force was pushing South and East from lake Victoria and a third British division was pushing north and east from Rhodesia. Still, Meinertzhagen had his concerns.

He [Smuts] is irresistibly drawn toward von Lettow and if he persists he will lose the initiative and the campaign will end in simply following von Lettow about wherever he chooses to wander. He is more mobile than we are and is operating in his own country. But we have vastly superior forces and should force the pace and dictate operations, making him fight us where we will and not where he wishes.⁶⁶

Smuts did not surprise. His main force was now moving to Morogoro, the German headquarters. After building up a two-week food supply, Van Deventer recommenced his march toward the rail, reaching it in ten days. He continued southeast, fighting continuous small actions, reaching Morogoro on 26 August to find it deserted. The Germans had cleared out.⁶⁷ The pincer movement Smuts had so desperately desired failed. Von Lettow-Vorbeck explains his reason for leaving the town.

The enemy expected us to stand and fight a final decisive engagement near Morogoro, on the northern slopes of the Uluguru Mountains. To me, this was never altogether intelligible. Being so very much the weaker party, it was surely madness to await at this place the junction of the hostile columns, of which each one individually was already superior to us in numbers.⁶⁸

Again, von Lettow-Vorbeck had read the intentions of his enemy, and Smuts had underestimated the abilities of his. Still, Smuts now had control of the Eastern Terminus of the Central Railroad. It was only a matter of time before the British and Belgian forces converged to control the entire railway and center of Africa. Again the time was ripe to declare victory and continue with a holding action. But Smuts, like Ahab after Moby Dick, was driven to catch his elusive enemy. The campaign continued unabated until September. Smuts and his force would attempt to gain the flank of the *Schutztruppe*. The Germans would lie in ambush, attack, and then fade into the night. The men of both sides continued to be plagued by disease and weakened by starvation. Even the commanders were not exempt from this fate, suffering jigger fleas, bott flies, and starvation. Finally, in early September, the movement died of its own weight. Both forces were spent. Smuts stopped chasing and von Lettow-Vorbeck stopped running. Neither force capitulated; they simply could go no further. Requests for surrender were submitted and ignored by both sides. It was time for rebuilding.

General Smuts was finally beginning to understand the worth of the native fighting men. The seemingly inborn prejudice of the South African men begrudgingly gave way to a realization that native troops were better suited for battle in the region. After months of starvation and fever the men were weakened to the point of uselessness. The hospitals could no longer handle the deluge of Europeans. Reluctantly, General Smuts gave the order to send the South African and European troops to Pretoria to rest.⁶⁹ He would rely primarily on the native troops of the KAR, Nigerian Brigade, and Gold Cost Regiment to continue the fight. Even the omnipresent Captain Meinertzhagen left the country in November, too sick to continue his intelligence work.⁷⁰

Smuts tried one more feeble attack in December. Like other attacks, it quickly devolved into a trench battle, then died. There was little left of either force, but the Germans held the richer, healthier ground north of the Rufigi river.

In South Africa, Prime Minister Botha was heard to exclaim, "Janny will take root in those African swamps."⁷¹ Realizing Smuts' obsession with the defeat of von Lettow-Vorbeck, Botha recalled him to serve as the South African representative to the Imperial Conference in London. When Smuts balked, stating that he had no desire to relinquish command, Botha replied, "Ah, Janny, we both know you're not a soldier."⁷² At the end of January, Smuts handed command to Major General A. Reginald Hoskins and left for England. Soldier or not, at the time he was the only truly successful British General of the Great War. He had regained the territory lost to the Germans and sent them scurrying south until they were on the brink of leaving their own colony. The British were firmly in command of all major waterways, railroads, ports, and roads. It appeared to be a victory.

Even Smuts believed so, repeatedly stating that the war in East Africa was over. All that was left was the mopping up. Evidently, nobody told von Lettow-Vorbeck.

Once again, leadership played a large part in the conduct of the two forces. Smuts was everything his predecessors were not: a natural leader who looked for a fight. Realizing weakness in subordinate commanders, he quickly removed those he perceived as lacking, sending a strong signal to those who remained. He rarely hesitated when making a decision. When presented with an opening, he pressed forward. Despite these qualities, he was, as Botha insisted, no soldier. As a guerrilla fighter in the Boer war, he had few concerns for logistics and lines of communication. These concerns would be his undoing in the East African Campaign. Additionally, as a political organization, his staff and commanders were loathe to share information. Meinertzhagen underscores the infighting within the staffs,

I am experiencing the greatest difficulty in making divisions send back information to G.H.Q. Each commander thinks he is a law unto himself and that his division is a watertight little compartment. There is even jealousy among commanders and they are too prone to keep valuable information to themselves from this motive alone. Even Smuts is kept in the dark for fear he passes on the piece of news to some competitor. . . . There is too much political element in this Expeditionary force.⁷³

In addition to a lack of trust among the South Africans, there was a lack of trust between the Boers and British. Bitter enemies only decades before, the two barely tolerated each other's presence. Meinertzhagen again noticed this, stating, "I have often noticed that Smuts will not listen to the matured advice of his British staff though he gulps down and digests any disconnected trash from a Boer scout."⁷⁴ Meinertzhagen himself shows his prejudice toward the Boers,

The South Africans have proved themselves unreliable fighters and unwilling to suffer casualties. Van Deventer, Brits, Enslin, and Crewe are incompetent

gasbags, their official reports amounting to mere flatulence. Discipline does not exist, bush warfare is not understood, looting is rife, hospitals are full to overflowing, with strong healthy men suffering from cold feet or an excess of patriotism.⁷³

One can only imagine the tension in the headquarters element between the various political and national factions.

Although an African himself, Smuts never truly understood fighting in East Africa. He despised the natives, disregarded disease, ignored the abominable terrain and vegetation, and underestimated his enemy. Despite a great number of native scouts and local big game hunters in the British arsenal who could have fought as the Germans did, he failed to use them in what would probably be their most useful function, reconnaissance and harassment of the enemy. Instead, he chose to meet von Lettow-Vorbeck at the ground of the German commander's choosing.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to true victory in the region was Smuts' fear of casualties. Aware of headlines from the Western Front and remembering sentiment from the Boer war, Smuts suffered from a fear of simply fighting the enemy to a defeat. He became increasingly predictable in his fixation with maneuvering to the flank. His obsession slowed him down, and allowed the German commanders to beat him every time. As was pointed out so many times by so many people, every life Smuts saved on the battlefield, he lost in the hospital.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck was never seriously threatened by the advance of the British. From the beginning, he had a clear vision of what he wanted to accomplish and communicated his intent to his commanders. He never let the British have a fight that he did not want them to have, preferring to choose the ground. By leading the British on a

long chase, he was able to destroy them with a thousand cuts instead of attempting a large, decisive action.

Despite a mix of local Europeans, black natives, German aristocracy, and German commoners, there was still never any mention of political ambition from von Lettow-Vorbeck's officers. Although Major General von Wehle and Captain Loof actually outranked von Lettow-Vorbeck, they understood that he was the man to lead the army and followed him implicitly. Governor Schnee alone had some political ambitions, but was largely ignored by the army, populace, and Imperial Germany. Again, the common goal allowed the German forces to accomplish what seemed impossible.

The German commanders also understood the importance of logistics. During the time before the arrival of Smuts, preparation for a long fight was von Lettow-Vorbeck's prime concern. He spent weeks caching supplies, making medicines, and preparing lines along which to supply his army. One primary focus was the health of the German troops. An unspoken understanding that the soldiers he had were all he would get led the German commander to ensure the health of his troops was of foremost concern to all. His rigid camp discipline combined with prophylactic medicine ensured his men were one step ahead of the British.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck's greatest attribute was his ability to accurately discern Smuts' intent. Early on, he realized that Smuts, a politician by trade, did not want a fight. After watching the British attempt to maneuver to the flank of his army at Kilimanjaro and Kahe, von Lettow-Vorbeck expected this new form of attack. By using his extensive web of native scouts, he was able to track and follow the British columns, which made little effort to hide, and meet them at ground of his choosing. Most troublesome to Smuts,

he was consistently able to break off fighting after inflicting small losses, preserving his force to fight again further down the trail.

With Smuts' departure, a third phase of the campaign began. Hoskins, an extremely able general, began a period of reconsolidation. Von Lettow-Vorbeck, with one eye looking south of the Rovuma River at Portuguese territory, also took the time to prepare his troops. The final phase of the campaign would prove to be the most physically draining yet.

¹Byron Farwell, *The Great War in Africa* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), 256.

²Charles Hordern, *Military Operations East Africa Volume August 1914-September 1916* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1990). Chief, Imperial General Staff, Lieutenant General Sir Archibald Murray had made this estimate in a memorandum to Lord Kitchener dated 8 October 1915, 212.

³Hordern, 212.

⁴*Ibid.*, 212-3.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Farwell, 250.

⁷Hordern, 213.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Farwell, 251.

¹⁰Leonard Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro, Africa, 1914-1918: The Dramatic Story of an Unconventional War* (New York: Ballentine Books), 1963, 105.

¹¹J. C. Smuts, *Jan Christian Smuts* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1952), 145-6.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974), 146.

¹⁵Referred to as Oldorobo hill in German documents.

¹⁶Mosley, 106.

¹⁷Paul E. von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1920), 104.

¹⁸Farwell, 254.

¹⁹Mosley, 106. *Sepoy* is the Indian term for soldier. *Coolie* was a term used for the men of the Indian labor battalions. Due to the rigid caste system in India, a *sepoy* considered himself to be well above the status of a *coolie*. As *coolies* were not soldiers, the term became a derogatory expression for any Indian *sepoy*.

²⁰Hordern, 233-4.

²¹Richard Meinertzhagen, *Army Diary* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 165.

²²*Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Smuts, 151.

²⁵Edwin P. Hoyt, *Guerilla! Colonel Von Lettow-Vorbeck and Germany's East African Empire* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc), 1981, 97.

²⁶Meinertzhagen, 166.

²⁷Von Lettow-Vorbeck, 108.

²⁸Mosley, 116.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 108-9.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 110.

³¹Miller, 150.

³²Brian Gardner, *On to Kilimanjaro* (Philadelphia: McRae Smith Company, 1963), 117.

³³Meinertzhagen, 167.

³⁴Mosley, 113.

- ³⁵Hoyt, 99; and Mosley, 115.
- ³⁶Meinertzhagen, 170.
- ³⁷Gardner, 117-115.
- ³⁸Meinertzhagen, 171.
- ³⁹Miller, 146.
- ⁴⁰Hordern, 251.
- ⁴¹Miller, 146.
- ⁴²Hoyt, 100.
- ⁴³Farwell, 263.
- ⁴⁴Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 119.
- ⁴⁵Gardner, 123.
- ⁴⁶Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 122.
- ⁴⁷Farwell, 264.
- ⁴⁸Hordern, 269.
- ⁴⁹Ibid.
- ⁵⁰Farwell, 269.
- ⁵¹Gardner, 128.
- ⁵²Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 125-6.
- ⁵³Farwell, 271.
- ⁵⁴Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 127.
- ⁵⁵Hordern, 274-5.
- ⁵⁶John Sloan Brown, "Of Battle and Disease: The East African Campaign of 1914-1918," *Parameters* (1982): 16-24, 17.
- ⁵⁷Miller, 172.
- ⁵⁸Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 139.

⁵⁹Hordern, 274-5.

⁶⁰Meinertzhagen, 179.

⁶¹Meinertzhagen, 184.

⁶²Farwell, 274.

⁶³Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 141.

⁶⁴Mosley, 125.

⁶⁵Meinertzhagen, 190.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁷Farwell, 283.

⁶⁸Von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa*, 151.

⁶⁹Hordern, 393.

⁷⁰Meinertzhagen, 200.

⁷¹Mosley, 150.

⁷²*Ibid.*

⁷³Meinertzhagen, 192.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 199.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

CHAPTER 5

PHASE 3: WATCHING ANTS: VAN DEVENTER TAKES THE INITIATIVE JANUARY 1917--NOVEMBER 1918

In January 1917, von Lettow-Vorbeck was watching ants. Thousands of ant colonies containing millions of ants littered the jungle floor in East Africa. Over the years, he had learned from natives that ants were reliable predictors of the rainy season. When the insects left their colonies to migrate to better ground, the rainy season could hardly be far off. Although it was early (the rainy season generally started in March) the ants were deserting their homes in droves. Columns of ants six-feet wide ranging as far as the eye could see fled from the low ground for parts unknown.¹ It looked like an early, long, and heavy rainy season. On 22 January 1917, five days after General Hoskins took command, von Lettow-Vorbeck's observations were proven true. The rains came.²

The rainy season proved to be the worst in recorded history. Individual units were left stranded for weeks at a time, surrounded by suddenly appearing raging torrents of unnavigable water. For four months, no hostile actions took place in the theater. The few patrols that were able to make it out of their lines were conducted in native canoes.³ Fields that had been almost ready for reaping were rendered barren by the unceasing deluge. Stores set aside for the year were either washed away or rotted on shelves in the sodden climate. Supplies lay waiting at ports, unable to be moved forward.

Shortages were ubiquitous on both sides. A toothbrush on the most forward British lines auctioned for the equivalent of \$6.00. For those inclined to greater luxury, a bottle of Hennessy three-star brandy was auctioned to a lucky man for \$50.00.⁴ Behind the German lines, von Lettow-Vorbeck, who had recently been promoted to major

general by the *Kaiser*,⁵ ordered all unnecessary personnel to leave. This included excessive servants (more than five per man), porters, and *bibis* (wives). Even with the expulsion of the extra mouths, he was forced to reduce rations. Men began hunting elephants--not for their tusks, but for their fat. Hippo, a tidbit previously fit for only the least discerning palate, was suddenly an epicurean delight. Despite the sizes of these two behemoths, the meat was usually consumed within a day by the ravenous men.⁶ In March, he was forced to cut his force even further; all sick or permanently disabled personnel were surrendered to the British. He no longer had the ability to care for them. Times were desperate on both sides.⁷

Into this setting came General Hoskins. A master at cutting through the traditional red tape of the British Army, he quickly began to refit his force. In early February 1917 the British (on paper) outnumbered the Germans. However, if British sick and hospitalized were not counted as effectives, the Germans, with only 1,100 Europeans and 7,300 Africans may have outnumbered the British. Hoskins quickly moved to remedy the personnel deficit by increasing the numbers of the KAR. The unit was brought from 13 battalions to 20 battalions, increasing to 24,000 officers and men.⁸ Troops were rapidly trained during the rainy season under cadres of seasoned soldiers. Although there were some green troops, a surprisingly large number were experienced soldiers. On one occasion, a new recruit quizzed a British sergeant major about a ribbon on his tunic. The sergeant major proudly boasted that it was given to him for service in the South African War. The recruit smiled and quickly demanded a similar ribbon for his uniform. He had also participated in the campaign--on the other side.⁹

Fully aware of the difficulties in using both motor and animal transport, Hoskins set out to increase the size of the native Carrier Corps. He sent word to British East Africa that native men were to be "recruited" as quickly as possible by any means necessary for service in the South. The number of porters in the Corps rapidly swelled from 7,500 to 175,000.¹⁰ Soon a veritable assembly line of porters linked the ports, supply depots, and British lines.

Supplies, unfortunately, were more difficult to procure. Smuts' declaration that the campaign was finished in East Africa had the same effect on supply as turning off a water spigot. Government officials wondered aloud how Hoskins could possibly need the vast amount of supplies he requested when the German force had been defeated. Eventually, Hoskins' tenacity triumphed; the spigot was turned begrudgingly back on and supplies flowed slowly into theatre.¹¹

The Germans could do little but wait. Their supplies gone, Major Kraut was sent into Portuguese East Africa to raid for supplies. What little he was able to bring back to German lines served only as temporary relief. Captain Max Wintgens was sent with 1,600 men toward Tabora for the same purpose, later to be captured and further reducing von Lettow-Vorbeck's numbers.¹²

Eventually the rains ceased. Soon thereafter, General Van Deventer was appointed Commander of British Forces in East Africa. The appointment was wildly unpopular with the British officers of the command. Hoskins was a popular, proper British general who fully understood how to deal with the mounds of paperwork so beloved by the British. Van Deventer was exactly the opposite. He appeared to be a political appointee--a crony of General Smuts--who had no understanding of the British

system. To make matters worse, he was a "Dutchman" who spoke very poor English. His voice was quiet and husky due to a bullet wound he received to his throat during the Boer War at the hands of an Englishman--a fact he was more than willing to share with his British counterparts.¹³

If he was indeed a political appointee, he quickly showed his prowess by assigning General Sheppard, another popular English general, as his chief of staff. Furthermore, he pointed out that General Hoskins had done a magnificent job of managing the required paperwork but the time for official formalities was over. It was time to fight. Slowly, begrudgingly, his stature in the eyes of British officers rose. Eventually, he won their respect.¹⁴

As with the previous five commanders, Van Deventer had a plan to defeat the Germans. General Northey and the Belgians would advance toward Mahenge to the German supply depot at Narongobe, southwest of Kilwa. Meanwhile, the remainder of the British force, under his direct command, would push west from the area around Kilwa. As this was von Lettow-Vorbeck's main ammunition depot, whether he fought or ran was unimportant. The Germans would be unable to carry all their ammunition and the British would have complete success.

On 19 July Van Deventer launched his attack at Kilwa. As the British line approached, von Lettow-Vorbeck chose to fight.¹⁵ His troops were located in excellent positions, well camouflaged with grass and bounded on each side by swamps and thorn. It seemed as though the British would be unable to flank the German line.

Unlike his predecessor, the inability to maneuver to a flank did not concern Van Deventer. He gave the order for the Gold Coast Regiment to charge the German line in a

frontal attack. While the Germans were occupied, the men of the KAR approached through the swamps. Initially, the battle went in favor of the Germans. The men of the Gold Coast Regiment were easily killed in the headlong charge. Suddenly, the KAR appeared--seemingly out of nowhere--and the tide turned. KAR soldiers quickly began rushing down the German flank, shooting *Schutztruppe* soldiers. Although he had inflicted severe casualties on the Gold Coast Regiment, von Lettow-Vorbeck realized he could not defeat the British at Kilwa and pulled back to Mahingo, where the Germans held out until a group was forced to surrender on 28 September. Both sides had taken severe casualties, but perhaps most disturbing to von Lettow-Vorbeck was the capture of over 1,000 of his best (and more importantly, irreplaceable) troops.¹⁶

Van Deventer did not let up. Having seen in the past what could happen if the Germans were allowed to regroup, the British commander strove to maintain the initiative. He continued to press the retreating Germans until 15 October, when he was able to force von Lettow-Vorbeck into battle around the villages of Mahiwa and Nyanzu. This engagement would prove to be the last large battle in the German colony. On 18 October, 1,500 German soldiers and *Askari* surrendered.¹⁷

Compounding von Lettow-Vorbeck's problems was the loss of two more columns of troops. Captain Tafel, one of von Lettow-Vorbeck's most trusted commanders, was sent with 1,400 men to find food. Unsuccessful, he was ordered to link up with the main German force, cross the Rufiji, and continue fighting in Portuguese East Africa. While marching toward German lines, he was surrounded and forced to surrender his entire force. A few *Askari* managed to get away, carrying Tafel's final message to his revered commander: "I'm sorry to have let you down."¹⁸ It was also around this time that Captain

Wintgen's force of 1,600 men was also captured after leading the KAR on a month long chase.¹⁹

After these losses, the *Schutztruppe* consisted of only 320 white and 2,500 black soldiers. Little more than half of the black soldiers had combat experience.²⁰ With Van Deventer hot on his heels and no hope of resupply of men, equipment, or supplies, von Lettow-Vorbeck decided he had no option but to cross the Rovuma River into Portuguese East Africa. He chose his best (and healthiest) 2,000 men, released most of the porters, ordered the remaining personnel to surrender to the British and slipped across the border.²¹

Van Deventer, however, anticipated this tactic. Although he was not yet allowed to cross into Portuguese territory, he was able to coordinate with the local Portuguese commander, Major Pinto. Pinto was to attack the Germans as they crossed the river. He took up a position in what he assumed was the most likely crossing site and waited, but had never fought von Lettow-Vorbeck. The German general had no intention of crossing at the site that the Portuguese Army was so evidently guarding. He moved a few miles upstream, crossed, encircled the Portuguese and destroyed them. In the plunder that followed, von Lettow-Vorbeck was able to procure enough food, clothing, and ammunition to temporarily ease his supply problems. More importantly, it was two days before Van Deventer heard of the defeat of the Portuguese--giving the Germans a lengthy head start.²²

The *Kaiser* had not forgotten about his troops toiling in the African jungle. In November, just after von Lettow-Vorbeck crossed into Portuguese territory, he sent zeppelin L59 on the longest dirigible flight in history in an attempt to resupply the

Schutztruppe. The mission, code named "China Snow," was to cover over 4,000 miles carrying 50 tons of desperately needed supplies. After delivering the supplies, the 740-foot-long dirigible was to be dismantled and cannibalized for use by the troops. The gasbag would be made into sleeping bags. The catwalk, specially constructed of leather, would be made into boots, and the outer shell could be made into uniforms. The only part of the dirigible that was not strictly for supply or function was a case of wine the captain brought along to celebrate the culmination of the flight. After almost four days of flight, the captain radioed von Lettow-Vorbeck for instructions. He was told to turn back, the *Schutztruppe* had surrendered only days earlier. In fact, the British had captured the German radio equipment and sent the message. The L59 turned back and later crashed in North Africa after a flight of 4 days, 1 hour, and 4,180 miles.²³

When the British came upon the remnants of the *Schutztruppe* on the German side of the Rovuma, they began inquiring as to the location of General von Lettow-Vorbeck. From one corner of the camp, a voice was heard yelling in English, "The General--He's gone to hell!"²⁴ Captain Loof, the commander of the remaining force then angrily surrendered his command. When questioned about what was left in the *Schutztruppe*, Loof, ever the cagey opponent, answered there were three of four *Königsberg* guns (he claimed he could not quite remember for sure) with plenty of ammunition for a fight. The British were also curious about the intent of L59. Although nobody in the *Schutztruppe* (including Loof) had even heard of the mission, he mentioned that another was right behind it on a similar mission.

With the ejection of the Germans from their colony it seemed as though war in East Africa was finished. King George V sent Van Deventer a gracious letter of

congratulations. In return Van Deventer, hardly a fan of the crown, sent a sarcastic, yet veiled thanks. He also received congratulations from General Sir Douglas Haig, to whom he responded with a slightly more sincere letter, although he felt his accomplishment paled in comparison to the recent loss of over a quarter of a million British men at Passchendaele.²⁵

Van Deventer believed the fight was not complete. By simply marching north, von Lettow-Vorbeck could reignite the smoldering embers of war in the region. To be successful, there were three things he felt he had to accomplish. First, to ensure the Germans did not attempt to reenter German East Africa. Second, to prevent them from entering Nyassaland, another British colony. Third, to continue to wear down the Germans to ensure they would no longer be a threat.²⁶ Knowing the land into which he was about to attack was a cesspool of disease, Van Deventer believed white troops would be a liability, prompting him to return most of the remaining men of European descent home. To make up for the loss, he continued to build the KAR, which would eventually consist of 35,000 officers and men. The struggle in East Africa was quickly turning into a war of African natives.²⁷

The rainy season came again, forcing a halt to all operations. But in March, with the end of rain came a resumption of the campaign. The Germans were fugitives, hunted by the Belgians, British, and ostensibly, the Portuguese. Averaging eighteen miles per day in the jungle, they quickly used up their supplies. To facilitate foraging, von Lettow-Vorbeck broke the force into three subcolumns commanded by his most trusted subordinates. The break into foraging subcolumns served to help, but not end, the supply problems.²⁸

Von Lettow-Vorbeck's entire strategy revolved around hunting Portuguese supply depots.²⁹ At the end of June, after months of small potatoes and no luck, he heard rumors of a large supply depot at Nhamacurra. The rumors proved to be true. On 1 July after a quick battle, he took what turned out to be the main supply depot in Portuguese East Africa. His main problem (in addition to the British still on his tail) was sorting through the booty to decide what to take. Two days later, hung over, full bellied, newly clothed, and heavily burdened with fresh supplies, the Germans left the depot to continue their march.³⁰

Success did not breed more success and within weeks the Germans were again experiencing the crippling shortages with which they were so familiar. Tempers were short. Von Lettow-Vorbeck was hardly able to walk due to infections in the soles of both feet, recurrent malaria attacks, and the removal of his big toenail. After his good eyeball was pierced by a piece of elephant grass, both eyes became rheumy and his vision deteriorated.³¹ Desertions of the African troops became common and even among the white troops there was seditious talk.³² Still, the *Schutztruppe* marched on.

In September 1918, von Lettow-Vorbeck decided it was time to reenter German territory. For nearly a month, the British had been unable to locate him. He knew of cattle north of the Rovuma and meant to have them for his troops. Desperate for supplies, he crossed the river back into home territory.³³ Almost immediately, Van Deventer discovered the movement and discerned von Lettow-Vorbeck's intent. Hoping to set a trap using the cattle as bait, he rushed the KAR into position, but was too late. The Germans had seen the British troops and retreated.³⁴

Thus began the most difficult time in the history of the *Schutztruppe*. The natives, once again in familiar territory, deserted in hordes. The venerable General von Wahle became so sick that he ordered his men to leave him behind for the British to capture. There were no supplies to be had. Wherever von Lettow-Vorbeck went, the British were nipping at his heels. Hemmed in on all sides by enemy forces, in October von Lettow-Vorbeck moved south to Rhodesia.³⁵ Here, in a last ditch effort, he attacked the supply depot at Kasama, gaining enough supplies to continue for a few more months.³⁶ The victory proved to be for naught. On 13 November 1918, von Lettow-Vorbeck was informed of the armistice, appropriately enough, by a British soldier under a white flag. Under terms of the Armistice, he was given one month to surrender his command to the nearest British authorities. On 25 November 1918, after verifying the veracity of the British claim that Germany had been defeated, von Lettow-Vorbeck surrendered his command of 155 Europeans and 1,168 natives to General Edwards at Abercorn, German East Africa. As a mark of respect for his foe, Edwards did not treat the Germans as prisoners, allowing von Lettow-Vorbeck's men to keep their swords and weapons on the march to Dar-Es-Salaam.³⁷

Von Lettow-Vorbeck returned to Germany a hero. As the undefeated author of the most successful German campaign of the Great War, he had captured the imagination and respect of the German people. In Berlin, he and his troops were greeted with a parade in which the general was the guest of honor. He was given command of a *Reichswehr* division, which proudly bore his name,³⁸ and became increasingly involved in politics. In 1935, Hitler recommended him for an Ambassadorship to the Court of St. James in London. A vehement anti-Nazi, von Lettow-Vorbeck declined. A biographer of von

Lettow-Vorbeck quizzed an official who was present at the meeting between von Lettow-Vorbeck and Hitler. "I understand that von Lettow told Hitler to go fuck himself." "That's right," was the reply, 'except that I don't think he put it that politely.'"³⁹ With his response to Hitler, von Lettow-Vorbeck became an outcast in German politics. Although Hitler repeatedly attempted to persuade von Lettow-Vorbeck to join the Nazi party, he was unsuccessful. Von Lettow-Vorbeck remained true to his Prussian beliefs of what was and was not correct until the end.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck remains a German hero. He was the only man to occupy British soil in World War I. Despite over four years of fighting and thousands of miles of walking (figure 8), his force was undefeated at the time of the armistice. Respect for the General was high on all sides. At a reunion of the British East African Expeditionary Force in 1929, he was the guest of honor.⁴⁰ He and Smuts became lifelong friends. After the Second World War, when Smuts found out his German comrade was destitute, he and Meinertzhagen organized the former British officers of the East African Force to send him food and supplies.⁴¹ At eighty-three years old, von Lettow-Vorbeck made a return trip to German East Africa, which was renamed Tanzania, to see the land once more and meet with his former *Askari*. He was quickly recognized by his former soldiers and soon local people of European descent were surprised by a group of doddering old black men cheering wildly and carrying an equally ancient white man away on their shoulders.⁴² Perhaps the greatest tribute to von Lettow-Vorbeck was paid to him during the darkest years of World War II. German officers sent an emissary to Switzerland to meet with British representatives to discuss the possibility of an overthrow of Hitler's regime. When

asked who the allies would find acceptable to lead the new government, the answer, from Winston Churchill, was Major General Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck.⁴³

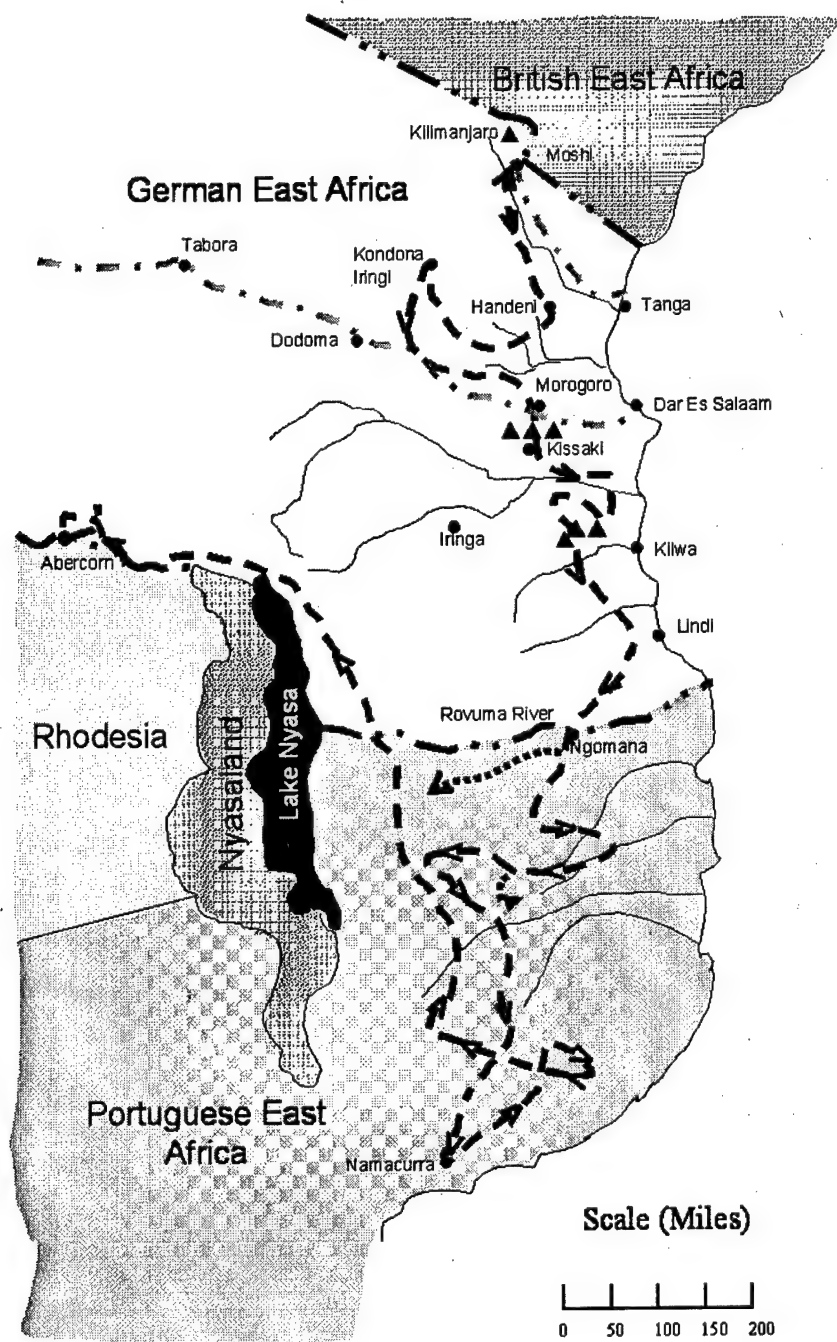


Figure 8. Trek of the *Schutztruppe* from Kilimanaro to Abercorn

¹Paul E. von Lettow-Vorbeck, *My Reminiscences of East Africa* (London: Hurst and Blackett, Ltd., 1920), 180.

²Ibid.

³Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974), 250.

⁴Ibid., 251.

⁵Leonard Mosley, *Duel for Kilimanjaro, Africa 1914-1918: The Dramatic Story of an Unconventional War* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1963), 157.

⁶Lettow-Vorbeck, 303.

⁷Brian Gardner, *On to Kilimanjaro* (Philadelphia: McRae Smith Company, 1963), 223.

⁸Miller, 260

⁹Gardner, 256.

¹⁰Miller, 256

¹¹C. P. Fendall, *The East African Force, 1915-1919* (Nashville: The Battery Press, 1992), 98.

¹²Edmund Dane, *British Campaigns in Africa and the Pacific, 1914-1918* (London, New York, and Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1921), 147; and Lettow-Vorbeck, 189.

¹³Gardner, 210.

¹⁴Fendall, 130.

¹⁵Dane, 146-148.

¹⁶Miller, 265.

¹⁷Dane, 148.

¹⁸Von Lettow-Vorbeck, 237.

¹⁹Fendall, 324-7.

²⁰Von Lettow-Vorbeck, 217.

- ²¹Ibid., 224.
- ²²Dane, 150
- ²³Farwell, 338-341.
- ²⁴Gardner, 224.
- ²⁵Gardner, 232.
- ²⁶Miller, 298
- ²⁷Gardner, 234.
- ²⁸Dane, 151.
- ²⁹Von Lettow-Vorbeck, 269.
- ³⁰Ibid., 272.
- ³¹Ibid., 249.
- ³²Gardner, 221.
- ³³Ibid., 253
- ³⁴Dane, 153.
- ³⁵Gardner, 257.
- ³⁶Dane, 153.
- ³⁷Farwell, 352-354.
- ³⁸Gardner, 268
- ³⁹Miller, 331.
- ⁴⁰Mosely, 211.
- ⁴¹Farwell, 357.
- ⁴²Miller, 332.
- ⁴³Barry Taylor, "Prussian Jungle Tactics," *Military History*, August 1991, 16.

CHAPTER 6

EPILOGUE

Sergeant Joseph Daniel Fewster, a South African Artilleryman, was one of the few men who served in both East Africa and Europe during World War I. After serving with the 1st (Hull) Heavy Battery (R.G.A.) in East Africa, his battery was split and re-mustered as the 545 (Hull) Siege Battery, (R.G.A.) for service in France. His rare point of view is recorded in the epilogue to his diary.

I have often been asked which of the two campaigns that I have been in was the more difficult. I have always replied that it was the East Africa one. This answer seems to surprise everyone who was not in East Africa for any length of time. I think two years in the field in East Africa was about the limits of a soldier's endurance. The shortage and poorness of the rations, the scarcity of water, the long daily treks in terrible heat told its inevitable tale.

Malarial, Blackwater, enteric fevers and dysentery were rampant to say nothing about such things as veldt sores which covered men from head to foot with sores that almost made him frantic. Just imagine marching 20 or 24 miles in a temperature of 120 degrees in the shade, if you could find any. Before you started, your water bottle was filled and if you did not strike water that night, you had no more until the next morning. Thirst is a terrible thing and it is under these conditions that one finds this out. In France, you could always quench your thirst within an hour or so.

Also I sincerely believe that all the flying and crawling insects in the world make East Africa their playground. They worry you by day and devour you by night. But perhaps the worst thing of all was the scarcity of news from home. The Field Post Office was in the hands of Indian staff. Whether they were careless and did not trouble to send the mail down the line, I do not know. . . . In France, we usually received letters seven or eight days after posting.

I freely admit that here was much more metal flying about in France and that there was a lot of gas, which was unknown in East Africa, but then one had good food and a decent supply of it. The climate was more congenial to our natures. One had spells off duty when things were a bit cushy. In France, one was troubled by only one kind of insect, not dozens of different species. And again, France was a civilized country, and East Africa away from the larger towns was not. I would sooner hear a big shell traveling along like an express train, than hear a lion roar a few yards away. I have heard both very often, but a shell never made my flesh run up my spine until it turned my hair into pin wire.

If the same terrible thing was to come again, and I had my choice, I should choose the civilized country.¹

Most European men of both forces would probably agree. The East African campaign was fought with unfamiliar tactics in a land of unfamiliar dangers. How then were the Germans able to continue successfully for so long with a numerically inferior force, while the British, who held the trump cards of numbers, supply, and control of the sea, were unable to bring the Germans to heel? Both civilian and military traditions placed demands and prejudices on the men of the Empire. Political agendas of the British and South Africans also hurt their cause. Von Lettow-Vorbeck possessed the talent to identify and capitalize upon these dynamics in British society and use them.

Perhaps British culture itself is most to blame. There were several competing factors within the psyche of British men at the time. The hubris of being the greatest colonial power in the world had been stung by regular defeats in the Boer War. The tactic of a stand up battle and charge in the greatest traditions of the knights of old had been rocked by stalemate in Europe and a fear of being labeled butchers. After the initial defeat at Tanga and subsequent order to defend only, small insults and defeats created an increasingly urgent desire among the British to take action until, when finally released, they could not see that were being baited by a master huntsman.

Part of the British military culture was a prejudice toward troops who were not of European descent. At the beginning of the war the British believed their white troops were the equal of anyone on the continent. Although they viewed their Indian troops in a paternal fashion, as if proud of how far they had come and expectant of how far they would go, they would never be on par with proper British soldiers. The British held an even more extreme view of the unreliability of black troops. Commanders could not

imagine any force comprised of black troops as a match for one made up of Europeans or Indians. Blacks they saw as barely more than savages. Additionally, the introduction of the South Africans into the campaign increased racial prejudice exponentially. The South Africans, who would eventually introduce *apartheid* as an officially sanctioned program, had no use for anyone not of pure European descent. These blinders prevented the British from seeing who were truly masters of warfare on the African continent--black African soldiers.

Von Lettow-Vorbeck was a rare man who had few, if any, racial prejudices and was able to instill this belief in his men of European descent. One of the only truly integrated armies of the time, the *Schutztruppe* had white soldiers working alongside *Askari* at most levels. Although leadership at the highest levels was strictly white, native troops served as advisors and held numerous leadership positions at lower levels. The *Askari* were proud men who saw themselves as soldiers of the German Army. In 1964, the German *Bundestag* voted to pay the *Askari* back wages owed to them for service in the Great War. The method used to ensure the old men were actually former soldiers was to take them through the manual of arms. The paymasters need not have bothered. The former *Askari* allowed no imposters within their ranks, proudly proclaiming, "*Mimi ni Askari mdaichi*"--"I am a German soldier."²

There would have been no need for African troops in the German army had the German government not realized the strategic importance of East Africa in preventing the British from gaining the entire East coast of the continent. To ensure the British would not gain overwhelming control of the Indian Ocean, they placed their most experienced colonial soldier in German East Africa. The Germans saw less strategic value in their

colonies on the West Coast. In an economy of force effort, Togoland, The Cameroons, and German Southwest Africa were left largely to their own devices. Within a year, all three colonies had been taken by the British.

Unlike the German government, the British failed to fully realize the strategic value of the colony, initially sending a force that could barely be considered an army under Aitken, a general who had little practical experience in leading large formations. Aitken was followed by Wapshire, whose fear made him ineffective, then Tighe, who, handcuffed by the Government's order to defend and hampered by the poor quality of his troops, decided instead of training his soldiers to drink himself into a stupor. The appointment of Smith-Dorrien, considered a fighting general, was an attempt to bring the war to closure. However, he envisioned the war in a strictly European, linear fashion with great mounds of equipment overwhelming the inferior force. As he never really took control of the force, one can only conjecture as to the outcome if he would have assumed command. Then came Smuts--a purely political appointment. Although he had seen some action in the Boer War as a commando, he was completely out of his element when commanding large formations. Even his mentor, Louis Botha, realized he was no soldier and eventually recalled him. Malleon, with his genius for cutting through the British red tape, proved to be adept at rebuilding the army. Although the reasons for his removal remain obscure, one can infer that, again, political necessity demanded a South African general be placed in charge of the force. Although ostensibly another political appointee, unlike previous commanders, Van Deventer had experience in the region and understood the importance of grabbing the German by the collar and never letting go. However,

seven successive British commanders could hardly hope to match the experience of one German commander.

That commander, von Lettow-Vorbeck was a natural leader who understood why he was fighting in East Africa. His understanding of circumstances allowed him to form a vision which he instilled in his command until everyone understood the reason for their presence in the colony. Remaining true to his initial vision prevented him from making many of the mistakes of the British, whose criteria for victory changed regularly. To be victorious, von Lettow-Vorbeck only had to keep the British chasing him.

As a graduate of the *Kriegsakademie*, von Lettow-Vorbeck was fully conversant with the concept of *Auftragstaktik*, or mission type orders. Under this German leadership principle, a soldier is given a desired endstate, but is expected to use his own innovation to devise a method of achieving it. He picked officers, not by rank, but by how able he believed they would be in achieving the desired results. Under his command were a major general, count, and naval captain, all of whom outranked him. He recognized and respected their rank, but only gave them responsibility when they had proven themselves able. Throughout the conflict, his most trusted lieutenants were Major General von Wahle, Major Kraut, and Captain Tafel. In Africa, rank was merely a method for determining how much to pay a person each month (if money was in fact available). Ability counted for much more.

Perhaps as devastating to the British as anything von Lettow-Vorbeck did was his reputation. The legend of invincibility that grew around von Lettow-Vorbeck came from the soldiers, government officials, and civilians of the British Empire. Tales of his prowess served to denigrate the ability of the British leaders while striking fear into the

hearts of British soldiers. It was not uncommon in the early stages of the war for soldiers to throw down their weapons and run when confronted by German soldiers simply because they believed they could not win against such a man.

Sadly, the lessons learned on both sides were lost in the rush toward mechanization. At the start of the Second World War, those who wished to know about the guerrilla style of warfare would find it not in the *Field Service Regulations* of the day, but on the dusty shelves of bookstores and in obscure studies conducted by various armies. Armies, whether fighting in the China-Burma-India theater, island hopping in the Pacific, or operating behind enemy lines in Europe, could have benefited from the experiences of both sides in the jungles of Africa.

¹Joseph D. Fewster, *A Hull Sergeant's Great War Diary*, annotated by his Grandson, Denis Fewster Hopkin [book on-line]; ed. Robert B. Sylvester (Pretoria, The South African Military History Society; accessed 27 August 2002); available from <http://rapidhttp.com/milhist/zgead0.html>. Quote is from the postscript of the diary.

² Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1974), 333. About 300 men showed up at a temporary cashier's office in Lake Victoria to receive their pay. The men wore bits and pieces of Askari uniform and were more than willing to show scars received in the Great War. However, none could produce a certificate, given to them by von Lettow-Vorbeck that proved they were Askari. The piece of paper was deemed unimportant by the natives.

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